192 PAGES

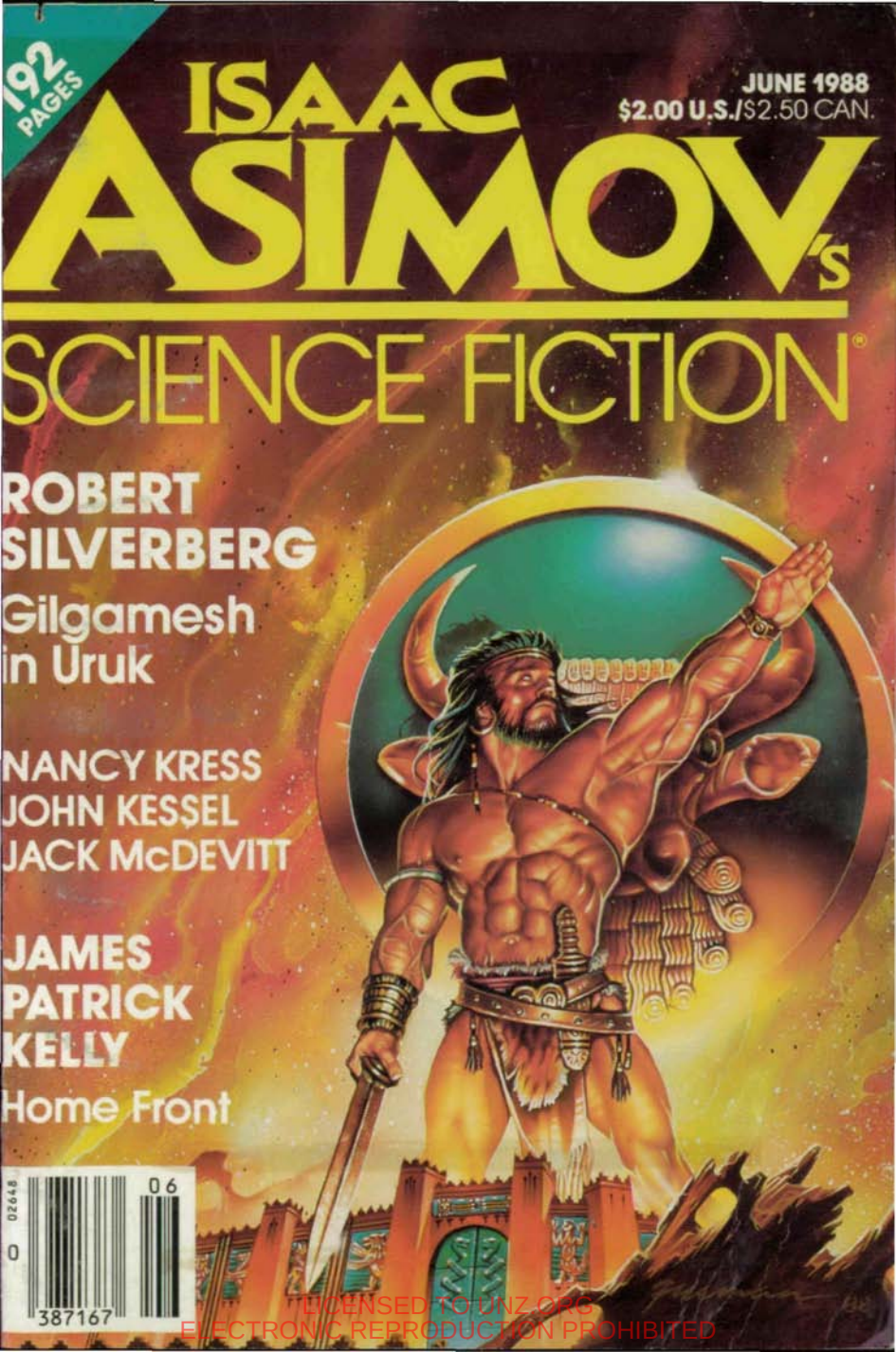
ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION®

JUNE 1988
$2.00 U.S./$2.50 CAN.

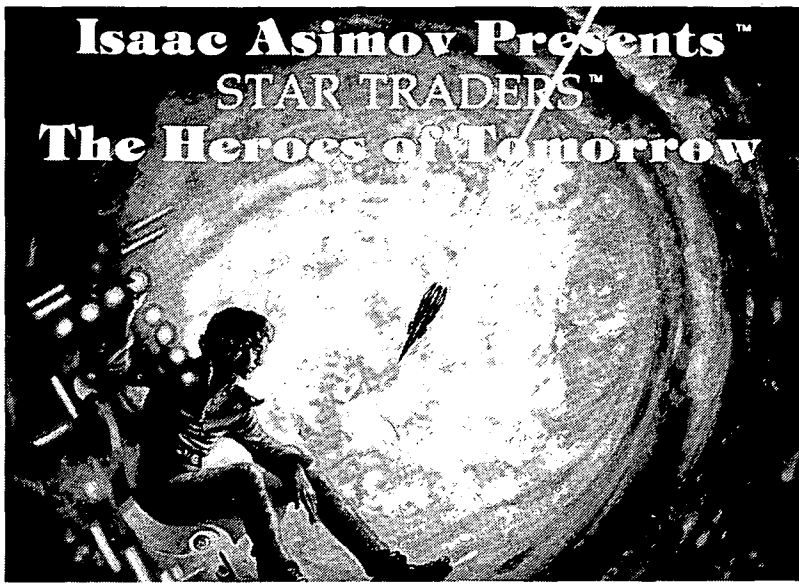
ROBERT SILVERBERG
Gilgamesh in Uruk

NANCY KRESS
JOHN KESSEL
JACK McDEVITT

JAMES PATRICK KELLY
Home Front



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



The heroes of the far future are the daring captains who cross the galaxy with the rarest cargoes of a hundred worlds.

The *Star Traders* game brings you the excitement of travel and trade, as two to six players race for wealth. In the end, only one player will be named the Imperial Trader.

Skill and planning are needed to locate your stations. But the "Trader's Luck" cards make every trip a chancy one. You can lose a cargo — or gain prestige and Imperial favor!

The *Isaac Asimov Presents: Star Traders* game is available at your favorite toy, hobby or book store for $19.95.

If your local store doesn't carry *Star Traders* you can order it by mail. Add $1.55 for postage and handling. Texas residents please add $1.44 sales tax. Please allow four weeks for delivery. Our catalog is free.

STEVE JACKSON GAMES
Box 18957-J Austin, TX 78760

Star Traders is a trademark of Steve Jackson Games Incorporated. *Isaac Asimov Presents* is a trademark of Davis Publications, Inc., used under license. All rights reserved.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Brann must overcome
the powers of an evil sorcerer and the
magic of the gods or all is lost...

Book Two of the *Drinker of Souls* Trilogy

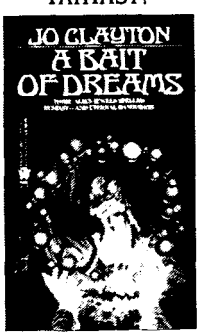
JO CLAYTON
BLUE MAGIC

When the Chained God is overcome by the treachery of the sorcerer Maksim and his cruel and demanding master, the god Amortis, an ancient debt makes Brann, the Drinker of Souls, and her demonic shape-shifting companions the last hope in a war between mortals' magic and that of the gods. Pursued by skillful assassins, fire elementals, and soul-thirsty demons, Brann must brave the perils of supernatural wrath and immortal enchantments in a desperate attempt to unchain the Chained God's true power before it's too late.

$3.95
Distributed by New American Library

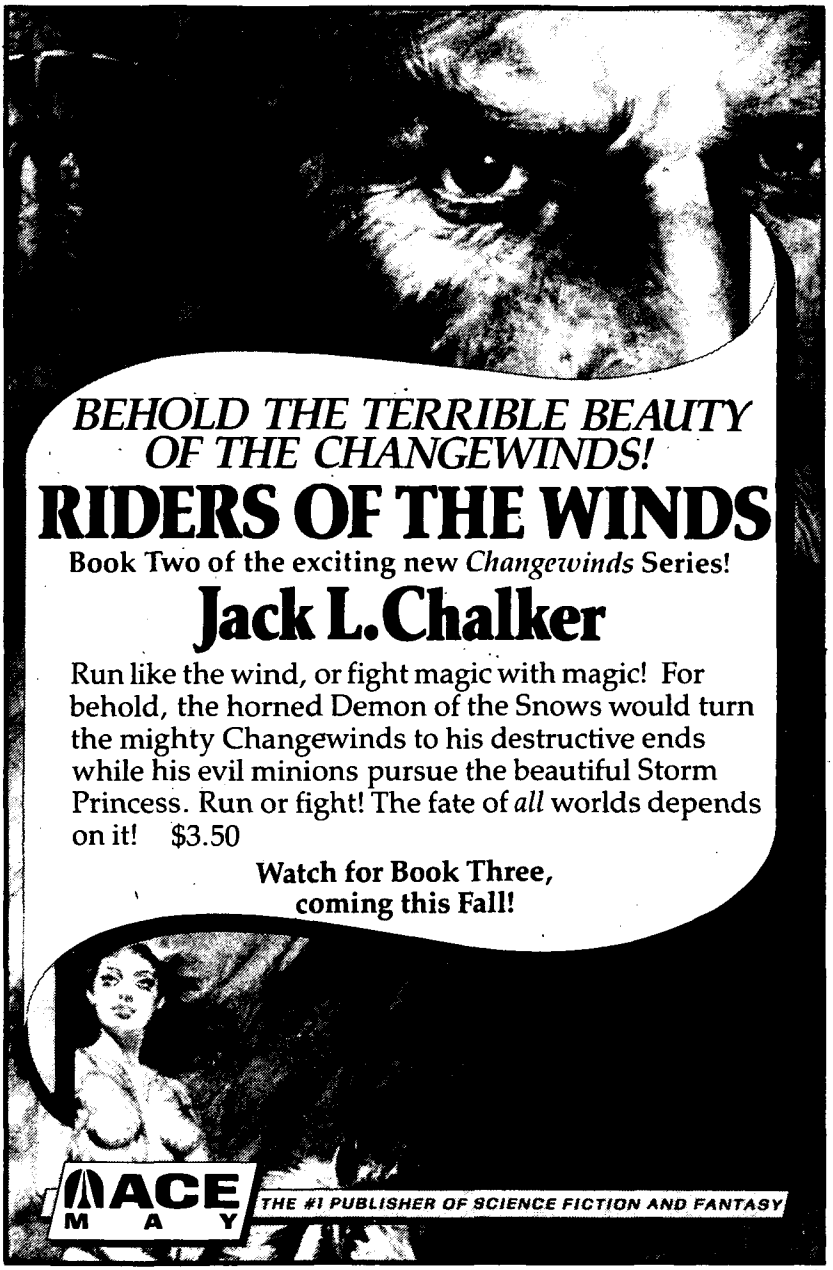
DAW FANTASY

ANOTHER
MAGNIFICENT
FANTASY!



$3.95

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED


BEHOLD THE TERRIBLE BEAUTY
OF THE CHANGEWINDS!
RIDERS OF THE WINDS
Book Two of the exciting new Changewinds Series!
Jack L. Chalker
Run like the wind, or fight magic with magic! For behold, the horned Demon of the Snows would turn the mighty Changewinds to his destructive ends while his evil minions pursue the beautiful Storm Princess. Run or fight! The fate of all worlds depends on it! $3.50
Watch for Book Three,
coming this Fall!
ACE
MAY
THE #1 PUBLISHER OF SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION®

Vol. 12 No. 6 (Whole Number 131)
June 1988
Next issue on sale
May 31, 1988

Novella
118 Gilgamesh in Uruk — Robert Silverberg

Novelette
80 Messiah — Phillip C. Jennings

Short Stories
20 Home Front — James Patrick Kelly
36 Last Contact — Jack McDevitt
58 Stable Strategies for Middle Management — Eileen Gunn
70 Having Keith — Martha Soukup
101 Mrs. Shummel Exits a Winner — John Kessel
112 In Memoriam — Nancy Kress

Departments
4 Editorial: Taxes — Isaac Asimov
10 Letters
16 Gaming — Matthew J. Costello
178 On Books: The Strange Case of J.G. Ballard — Norman Spinrad
192 The SF Conventional Calendar — Erwin S. Strauss

Cover art for "Gilgamesh in Uruk" by Gary Freeman

Isaac Asimov: Editorial Director **Gardner Dozois:** Editor
Sheila Williams: Managing Editor
Joel Davis: *President* **William F. Battista:** Publisher

Published 13 times a year by Davis Publications, Inc. at $2.00 per copy ($2.50 per copy in Canada). Annual subscription of thirteen issues $19.50 in the United States and U.S. possessions. In all other countries $24.20, payable in advance in U.S. funds. Address for subscriptions and all other correspondence about them, P.O. Box 1933, Marion, OH 43305. **If you have questions regarding your subscription call (614) 383-3141.** Address for all editorial matters: Davis Publications, Inc., 380 Lexington Avenue, NY, NY 10017. Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine® is the registered trademark of Davis Publications, Inc. © 1988 by Davis Publications, Inc., 380 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10017. All rights reserved, printed in the U.S.A. Protection secured under the Universal and Pan American Copyright Conventions. Reproduction or use of editorial or pictorial content in any manner without express permission is prohibited. All submissions must include a self-addressed, stamped envelope; the publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. *Second class postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian third class postage paid at Windsor, Ontario.* POSTMASTER, send form 3579 to IAsfm, Box 1933, Marion OH 43306. In Canada return to 625 Monmouth Rd., Windsor, Ontario N8Y3L1. ISSN 0162-2188.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

TAXES

One of the best-remembered remarks of Benjamin Franklin is: "Nothing is certain but death and taxes."

Recently, I came across a follow-up to that remark. It goes: "Yes, but there is a difference between the two of them. Death doesn't get worse every time Congress meets."

Do taxes? There's no way I can tell. I don't understand taxes. Something like thirty years ago, I stopped trying to make out my own tax forms and hired an accountant to do it for me. I gave him all the figures I could work out. He did all the calculating and handed me back a form with little x's marking the places I was supposed to sign, and I signed, made out checks according to his directions and mailed them to the place he told me to mail them. All further communications from tax agencies I sent to him without hurting my eyes by trying to read them. He took care of them, sending forms with little notes telling me what to do when I have to do something. Then eventually he sent me his bill and I paid it.

With the years, the forms I sign have grown steadily more numerous and more complicated, the taxes have steadily increased, the accountant's bill has also steadily increased, and my understanding of what is in all those papers I sign has steadily decreased. I tell you frankly—I don't know what's going on.

You may wonder how that's possible. Surely, I am as intelligent as my accountant. If he can understand it; I can understand it. I just have to put my mind to it.

Well, I don't want to put my mind to it. My accountant doesn't do anything else. He reads books on taxes. He reads government forms on taxes. He thinks about taxes. He lives and breathes taxes. And he stays reasonably sane—in a manner of speaking.

If I spent as much time on the subject as he does, I, too, would understand taxes and be able to make out my own forms, but I don't have the time to spend on it. My time must be spent on writing. If I spent enough time on taxes to gain an understanding of the subject, my writing output *and* my income would drop considerably, and, frankly, I can't afford it.

Now in 1986, Ronald Reagan (whose tax forms are much simpler

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

than mine, I am very sorry to say) managed to push through a tax that supposedly made things much simpler. I wouldn't know, of course, but that's what they tell me.

Apparently, however, one of the things that is in the new tax bill, or that the Internal Revenue Service may be able to read into the new tax bill, is an item that treats writers as though they were General Motors, one and all.

In other words, it may be that writers will have to capitalize their business expenses. Suppose you write a book and that doing so involves certain expenses. Well, the IRS may be within its right to insist that you can't deduct those expenses till the book is published and begins to earn money. What's more, you have to spread out those expenses over the earning lifetime of the book.

What this means is that if it takes several years for you to write the book, then you will have to leave the expenses undeducted for those years.

Suppose, then, that you would like to be a writer and you buy a typewriter (or word processor) and a lot of paper and typewriter ribbons. Suppose you have to make a trip to Niagara Falls to take notes on what it looks like because certain scenes are going to take place there. Suppose you have to write letters and expend postage trying to get the necessary information you need. Suppose you buy reference books you will need. All these expenses you cannot deduct until

ISAAC ASIMOV:
Editorial Director
GARDNER DOZOIS:
Editor
SHEILA WILLIAMS:
Managing Editor
RALPH RUBINO:
Corporate Art Director
TERRI CZECZKO:
Associate Art Director
RON KULINER:
Senior Designer
ANTHONY BARI:
Junior Designer
DENNIS DOYLE:
Junior Designer
CAROLE DIXON:
Production Manager
ROBERT J. ALLEN:
Production Assistant
CYNTHIA MANSON:
Director Subsidiary Rights
FLORENCE B. EICHIN:
Permissions & Contracts Manager
VEENA RAGHAVAN:
Public Relations
Promotions Manager
SONYA CASTELLUCCI:
Circulation Director Retail
Marketing
PAUL CHRISTIAN:
Circulation Planning Director
LAURA GUTH:
Circulation Director Subscriptions
RISA LUND:
Advertising Services Manager
ADVERTISING OFFICES
NEW YORK
(212) 557-9100

WILLIAM F. BATTISTA:
Publisher

JOEL DAVIS
President

FRED EDINGER
Senior Vice President
Finance

PAULA COLLINS
Senior Vice President
Circulation

CARL BARTEE
Vice President
Manufacturing

Please do not send us your manuscript until you've gotten a copy of our manuscript guidelines. To obtain this, send us a self-addressed, stamped business-size envelope (what stationery stores call a number 10 envelope), and a note requesting this information. Please write "manuscript guidelines" on the bottom left-hand corner of the outside envelope. The address for this and for all editorial correspondence is *IAsfm*, Davis Publications, Inc. 380 Lexington Avenue, NY, NY 10017. While we're always looking for new writers, please, in the interest of time-saving, find out what we're looking for, and how to prepare it, before submitting your story.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the book is published and begins earning money.

Ah, but suppose you can't interest a publisher and the book is never published. Then you're stuck and all your expenses are on your own head. If you can't afford those expenses, you have no business trying to be a writer.

Ordinary businessmen get all kinds of tax-breaks in order to insure they get started. Farmers get subsidies. Congress recognizes the fact that the economic life of the country must be stimulated.

But writers? Who cares about writers?

Besides don't writers get advances?

Yes, they do. But your ambitious would-be writer can't walk into a publisher's office and ask for an advance. In order to be good enough to get a publisher to give you money before you do a book for him, you have to have a track record. And if you can't afford to establish one because the tax laws make it impossible for you to do so, then you will never reach the point where you can get an advance.

Of course, if you are a clever thief who has made millions of crooked dollars on Wall Street and been caught, you can offer to write a book about your experiences and get an advance on it even if you've never written a book before. The book will be a sure seller and you can always hire some downtrodden scrivener to write it for you. But how many of us have the chance, the wit, and the temperament to be a big-time crook?

Most of us have to write without nefarious advantages and for quite a while before we can talk any publisher out of an advance.

I was a published writer for eleven years before a publisher was willing to grant me an advance for a book. And that book was already written, but it had to be revised.

Additional years had to pass before I could actually say to a publisher, "Give me an advance and I will write a book for you," and then get one before I put a word on paper.

And I'm lucky. Many writers can be published and yet never reach the point where their word alone is sufficient for an advance.

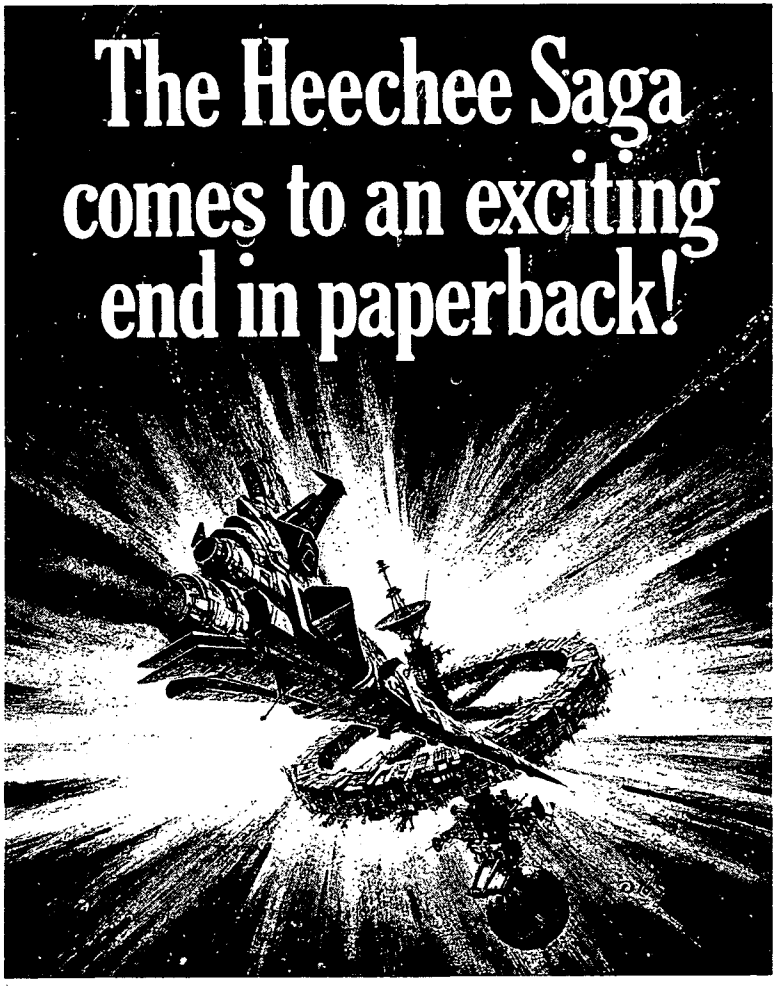
Of course, you may feel that a writer ought to write material that requires very little in the way of expense (just a cheap second-hand typewriter, low-quality paper, and stories he makes up out of his head and doesn't have to dig up detail for) until he reaches the stage of getting advances.

Well, then, how big do you think the advances are? My very first advance was for $250.00. It took me six weeks to revise the book—and I'm a very fast worker. Living for six weeks on $250 is no great dream of munificence.

In fact, if you lump my advances, my flat payments and my royalties all together, it wasn't until I had been a professional writer for twenty-one years that I finally reached the point where my annual

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Heechee Saga comes to an exciting end in paperback!



THE ANNALS OF THE HEECHEE by Frederik Pohl

Just outside the Milky Way lurked the would-be destroyers of the universe. Humans called them the Foe. Heechee called them the Assassins. No one who had ever seen them had lived to tell the tale. Now they were venturing out again.

And all of Robinette Broadhead's massive resources could not tell him how to stop them...

On Sale in May $3.95

DEL REY #1 in Science Fiction and Fantasy Published by Ballantine Books

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

income left me in a comfortable financial position.

The fact that I could deduct my expenses as they occurred, no questions asked, helped stretch out my income just sufficiently to make it possible for me to keep trying those twenty-one years.

Again, remember that I'm an exception. We tend to judge a profession by its most successful practitioners, and when there is an enormous gap between the most successful and the average, we are being terribly unfair.

Bill Cosby, as an actor, is perhaps the richest man in the United States, but at least eighty percent of all actors are more or less steadily unemployed. Should we assume that all actors are as rich as Bill Cosby?

Again, Stephen King is not far behind Cosby, but the average *successful* writer (one who is actually published) makes perhaps $7,000 a year. Presumably, Congressmen, when they pass the tax laws, assume that all writers are Stephen Kings and that they should be treated like any other big business—like General Motors, for instance. But it's not so. They're leaning on people who can't make a living without having secondary jobs, or depending on their spouse's earnings, and if you deprive them of the stretching effect of tax deductions, the whole thing may collapse.

And another thing—The writer is supposed to estimate the number of years over which a particular book will produce earnings and stretch out his deductions accordingly. There is *no way at all* in which such an estimate can be made. Some of my books earned money for one year and then gracefully breathed their last. Others are still making substantial bucks some thirty-five years after having been published. How can I predict?

And if I could, how can I find the time to make the necessary calculations, to work out exactly which expenses went for which books and so on.

Even rich writers, in other words, are going to find the new tax law, if illiberally interpreted by the I.R.S., to be a dreadful imposition that will greatly lower earnings and make it much more difficult to write. That also goes for illustrators, for artists, for musicians, and for other creative individuals.

This may not bother Congress, which consists largely of lawyers who can find creativity only in the dictionary (if someone will tell them how to spell it) but surely it must bother those who find the literary and artistic creativity of a nation to be the true measure of its culture and worth. ●

If you'd like to voice an opinion on this matter, we suggest you write to your local congressman. — The Editors

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

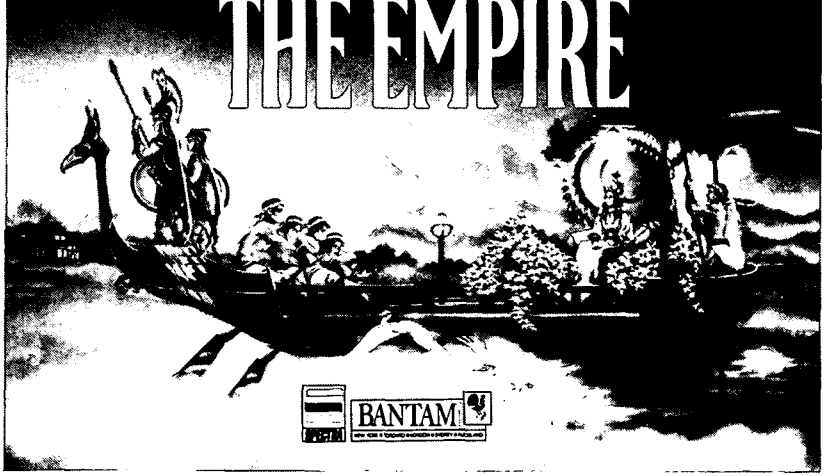
From two of fantasy's most brilliant minds... A magnificent new epic in a land of magic and murder.

"This full-bodied dynastic fantasy has the sweep and drama of a good historical novel."
—*Publishers Weekly*

"[Feist] and Wurts have combined their considerable story-telling talents to forge a tale of war, political intrigue and love.... Fine reading."
—*Orlando Sentinel*

RAYMOND E. FEIST AND **JANNY WURTS**
Author of THE RIFTWAR SAGA — Author of STORMWARDEN

DAUGHTER OF THE EMPIRE



BANTAM

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LETTERS

Dear Mr. Dozois,

Even though parallel-history stories have paled enormously for me over the years, I couldn't help but enjoy Brad Ferguson's excellent "The World Next Door."

Angus MacDonald
2001 Cedar Street
Concord, CA 94519

I'm glad you did. Remember, nothing is so old that the fire of talent cannot make it seem shiny and new.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Dozois,

I would like to congratulate you on an excellent September issue. "The Secret Sharer," in its original is my favorite piece of non-science fiction. Please extend my sincerest thanks to Robert Silverberg for his tremendous rendition of it. He upstaged Card, whose stories I always enjoy. How old is he? Fairly young I think. I also thoroughly enjoyed "The World Next Door" by Brad Ferguson. I hope to see more of his fiction in the future. Keep up the good work.

Sincerely yours,

David Maxwell
Waynesboro, PA

Robert Silverberg is currently fifty-one years old, but he has the heart of a young man—pickled in formaldehyde in a glass jar on his desk. (That line is one of Robert Bloch's. No plagiarist, I.)

—Isaac Asimov

Dear People:

I can't help but note that you and *Analog* are both owned by Davis Publications. Please tell me if you share manuscripts. Meaning, let me know if I would be wasting my time by submitting a story to one of you after having been rejected by the other.

The Everest story by Kim Stanley Robinson, by the way, was fantastic. Not necessarily SF, but better than anything else in the October issue. I'm still trying to figure out, however, why I can buy an October issue in August. Why not make it a December issue for that matter, or call it June 1995?

Just out of curiosity,

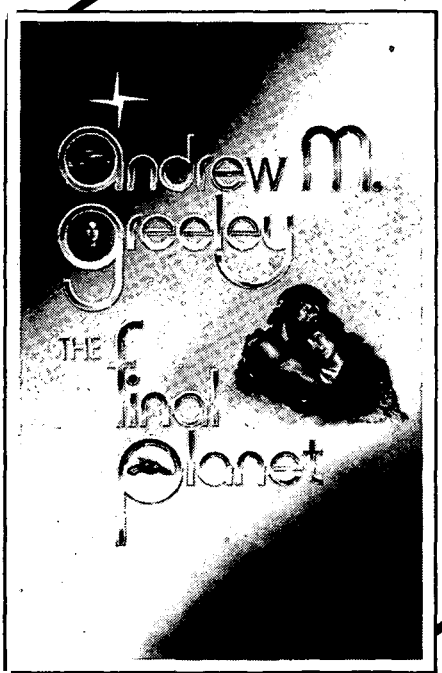
Tomás Chamberlin
Puerto Plata
Dominican Republic

The two magazines have two different editors, with two different sets of tastes. What one likes, the other might not, and vice versa. You would be foolish not to try B if A rejects your story. There's no charge,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Greeley's talent for spinning a good, lusty yarn is undeniable. Fans of...*God Game* will want this." –*Library Journal*

FIRST TIME IN PAPERBACK!



The land is beautiful, the women are lovely and loving–but a paradise it isn't. In fact, the planet of Zylong is more dangerous than any of the weary travelers could imagine...and this just might be the last journey any of them ever take.

For the men and women of the battered pilgrim vessel IONA, members of the Holy Order of St. Brigid and St. Brendan, it is the last chance. Even with survival at stake, they must obey their holy order's rule: they cannot invade, they must be invited to land.

58338-8

$4.95

416 pages

A MAY SUPER RELEASE PUBLISHED IN ASSOCIATION WITH

WARNER BOOKS

TOR

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

you know, but a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

In your reply to a letter in the October 1987 issue you remark that "War is a crime . . ." and then ask "Why is that a puzzle?"

It is a puzzle because if "war is a crime," then by definition all the persons of this nation and all the others who fought in a war against Hitler must be criminals. *You* were in the U.S. forces; do you feel like a criminal?

Doesn't your rather absolute statement, "War is a crime," need (at the very least) some qualifiers?

David L. Travis
Clovis, NM

I presume that starting *a war, as Hitler and Tojo did, is not quite the same as defending yourself against an invading war machine. Perhaps you see the difference, too. As for* me *in the U.S. Forces—I happened to be lucky enough never to kill anyone. Had I done so, I think I would have suffered.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear *IAsfm,*

In the September issue, two letters deal with errors. In the second, M. Bechtel complains that in "Neptune's Reach" a bathyscaphe is lowered from synchronous orbit into the atmosphere, and then goes on to explain why that can't be. Sorry, M. Bechtel! You're *wrong*! It *is* possible. While I'd suggest you read the extant material on elevators and skyhooks (a good starting point would be Hans Moravec's "Cable Cars in the Sky" in *The Endless Frontier*, Vol. I (Ace SF)), I can manage a quick explanation here.

What you forgot to consider is the mass at the upper end of the bathyscaphe's cable: the hoist/counterweight. Take a moon, any moon (or just about); it is in synchronous rotation so that it keeps the same face turned towards its primary at all times. Now elongate that moon along the axis it keeps pointed at its primary, so that you end up with a barbell moon. The center of mass of that system is still in the same circular orbit as before, but one half-moon is now closer to the primary, while the other half-moon is farther away, both in apparent violation of Kepler's laws. The extra force the inner half-moon requires to keep from falling (as it is going slower than it should) is of the exact same magnitude as the one the outer half-moon requires to keep from flying away (as it is going faster than it should), but of opposite direction. The linking bar is what brings those forces together so that they cancel out.

The bathyscaphe expedition would then start out something like this: the hoist and bathyscaphe are some short distance from each other, linked by a strong cable. They spin slowly so as to keep the bathyscaphe pointed at the planet. The force which pushes the bathyscaphe "down" and away from its hoist is simply the centrifugal effect; as the hoist pays out cable, small thrusters adjust the spin of the hoist-cable-bathyscaphe system to keep it in synchronous rotation (the spin rate is constant,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

but the angular momentum keeps increasing). The result is the lowering of the bathyscaphe towards the surface, while the hoist moves away from the planet.

Glad to have been able to restore the scientific plausibility of that story,

Daniel U. Thibault
295 de la Corniche
St-Nicolas, P.Q.
Canada

I just want to tell everyone that I'm an innocent bystander in this particular argument.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I have been a subscriber to *Asimov's* for several years now. I must say that I have really enjoyed the magazine. I enjoy the variety of items you publish; I vote that you continue to choose well-written stories as long as they have some elements of fantasy or SF in them. I also vote for characterization.

I always read the issue from page one to the end, and I always enjoy your editorial. I just finished reading your editorial on "Unification" in the August '87 issue and I felt I had to put in my two credits's worth.

As an historian by training, I am somewhat familiar with the civilizations you mention as committing overkill on the issue of patriotism. Patriotism not only destroyed the Greek and Roman cultures, but it kept other countries from unifying into a peaceful whole. I happen to think that had Germany unified before 1870, it may not have experienced the dictators that plagued that nation for seventy-five years. And without those dictators . . . we can only guess how this century's history would have been written. Even today, the problems of patriotism are destroying lives and cultures. The Middle East wars are basically patriotic in nature, albeit with religious overtones. Peoples with such similar cultures should not be destroying their cultures and values in the name of patriotism.

I hope that in the future, the people of this planet get their acts together and realize that we could accomplish so much for the welfare of humanity if only we would work together and stop fighting each other. I don't feel I'm being unpatriotic by saying this, nor do I feel that the United States has all the answers to world events and problems. We need to stop arguing and start discussing how we are going to help ourselves survive and improve life here on Earth before we can seriously think about settling space. We can't be so irresponsible as to think we can take our arguments out there, can we?

Live long and prosper!

Denise Allen
Downey, CA

Thank you. I agree with every word.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

In your September 1987 release, one story earnestly excited me and then disgusted me. I started "The World Next Door" by newcomer Brad Ferguson with that growing, rare thrill reserved for new talent

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that shows brilliance and promise. The story had something I consider exceptional and exhilarating: subtlety.

Its complex world unraveled clue by clue. I ingested word after provocative word, electrified by the author's fresh sense of historic science fiction (our familiar history having ended about twenty-five years ago). And my anticipation mounted. I haven't been that captivated since *IAsfm* discovered Connie Willis.

This story, I nodded to myself, could be Hugo or Nebula meat.

Why then did I grow increasingly upset? Because on the last three pages Mr. Ferguson blatantly and continually insults the reader's intelligence. He bludgeons us with agonizing, prolonged explanations as if we were simpletons. For instance, we already know what year the big war took place: he'd hinted at the "Fidel Flu." We've already figured out who the president still is: he refers to the picture on the half dollar coin. We know the alternate world destroys itself: the mysterious mass dreams cease simultaneously.

His biggest blunder, however, is having his characters "look at the camera" and philosophize about the existence and fate of an alternate world. C'mon, we already know it exists: not only can we deduce this from those familiar references in the town's dreams (e.g., Princess Di, personal computers, the Space Shuttle), but Mr. Ferguson even has Elvis tip us off with the title song "The World Next Door." Why didn't Mr. Ferguson lift his pen when those dreams abruptly ceased?

Where does the author stray? He assumes his readers are watching TV, and that we need to be hit over the head with resolution through glaring, dense verbal explanation. So at the end he needlessly introduces a character and a newspaper from the alternate world. (And Mr. Ferguson even feels compelled to justify this silly twist! The war was so bad that it squeezed the boy into another dimension? Puh-leeze! Give us a break!)

At this point, Mr. Ferguson, you "might as well haul in the orcs." That's where you lost us. And your Nebula.

Sadly,

Garrett A. Kooyer
P.O. Box 37805
Honolulu, HI 96837

The hardest thing for a writer to decide is just how much to explain. Too much and readers are insulted; too little and they are confused. The trick is to do it just right—leaving half the readers insulted and half the readers confused. Personally, I'm one of the overexplainers (no untied knots unless you need one for a sequel) so I sympathize with Mr. Ferguson.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Gardner,

As a longtime reader of the Braille version of *IAsfm*, and a longtime member of the National Federation of the Blind, I have to tell you that I found Kim Stanley Robinson's story "The Blind Geometer" very exciting.

You and Mr. Robinson are probably aware that most of the gadgetry described in the story is available today. The only machine

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I know of that is not available is the Xerox that would reproduce an articulated version of a hand written drawing or would make either Braille or print copies. There are high speed print-to-Braille computer printers and there is a very expensive reading machine which reads print books aloud. There are also many speech synthesizers in computers which make computers available to blind consumers and professionals.

I am really amazed at the amount of research Mr. Robinson did into the psychology of people born blind. He was really on the mark with his descriptions of feelings and actions by Karlos Nevsky. I hope he will put his hero into other stories.

I always enjoy *IAsfm* and have done so since its inception. Keep up the good work.

Your avidly reading and enjoying friend,

(Mrs.) Anne (Née Lifton, Formerly Darche) Aussiker
150 Harrison Street
Denver, CO 80206

A round of applause for K. S. Robinson is, I think, in order.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Doctor Asimov,

As an occasional reader of *IAsfm*, I picked up the August issue for the Kim Stanley Robinson story, "The Blind Geometer." Although I was thoroughly unimpressed with his "Escape from Kathmandu," I was interested to see how this new story compared with other stories in this curious sub-genre, e.g., "The Eye-flash Miracles" and "The Persistence of Vision."

After reading it, I decided that the author had picked up a few facts about blindness and tried to build a story around them. It was nothing special, and not really SF, for all that it was set in the future. But one line in particular caught my attention:

> "I can go sit in the corner park with the drug dealers and the bums and the crazies and I *know* I'll be safe, because even those people still have the idea that it isn't right to hurt a blind man."

Come off it, Mr. Robinson! I live in one of the most unviolent places in Britain, but recently my girlfriend was hassled by a gang of youths on a train solely on account of her blindness. Needless to say, none of the other passengers bothered to do anything to assist her.

In conclusion, I find the sentiments naïve to an unacceptable level.

Paul G. Beardsley
Havant, Hants
Great Britain

Heavens! The unconcerned onlookers in Great Britain! I thought that happened only in New York! At least that's what non-New Yorkers think.

—Isaac Asimov

MOVING? If you want your subscription to *IAsfm* to keep up with you, send both your old address and your new one (and the ZIP codes for both, please!) to our subscription department: Box 1933, Marion OH 43306.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

GAMING

by Matthew J. Costello

There have been attempts lately to make computer games more lively through use of varied game elements, dramatic story-telling devices, and a greater general appeal graphically.

One of the most successful has been Microprose's *Pirates!* which features an exciting plot line and several interesting "games" including a smashing broadside battle and toe-to-toe dueling on land and sea.

Recently, *Defender of the Crown* (Mindscape, Inc.) arrived in a conversion for the lowly Commodore 64/128. *Defender of the Crown* made a big splash when it was released last year for the Amiga. The game looked so smashing it was called Cinemaware—a nod to its attempt to create a movie-like field in the adventure. It featured the work of a team of over a dozen people, working on art, special effects, game systems, and an original score and orchestration. *Defender of the Crown* was years removed from the Spartan exercise of text adventures.

Players select a Saxon character such as Wilfred of Ivanhoe or Wolfred the Wild. You see the characters portrayed, and note their abilities in such areas as "leadership" or "joust."

A nicely detailed map shows you Medieval England, with legendary embellishments. The Norman invaders control three castles in the South. The Saxons control three to the North. On your turn you can study the map, to determine the strength of opposing forces, transfer forces out of your castle to build an army, or launch a raid.

During a raid, the computer presents an enjoyable cinematic sequence, with the Saxon knights bullying their way into a torch-lit castle. Impressive looking, it's difficult (and frustrating) fighting your way past the Norman guards.

If you've formed an army, you can take it into adjacent areas, to fight other lords. There are a number of strategic options, such as Ferocious Attack, Bombard, Stand and Fight, or Outflank—which doubles the effect of a powerful leader. The computer runs the battle and you can—too quickly—see the effect of the clash of arms.

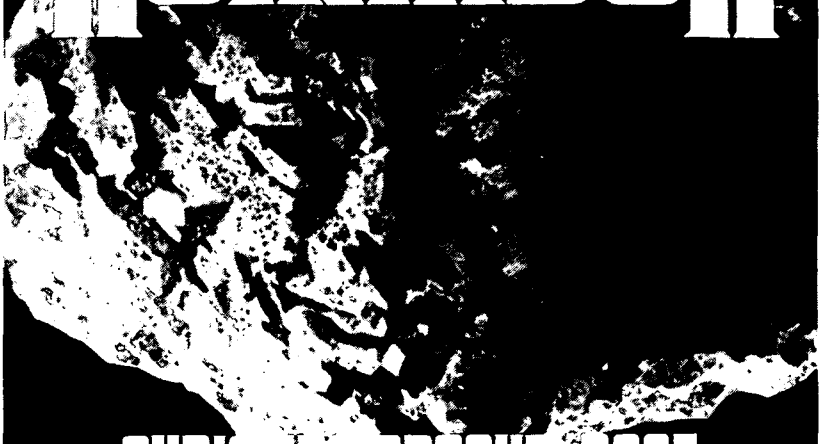
If you have purchased a catapult (from the income that your land

(Continued on page 35)

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When a rock-like creature from Mars with
an appetite for radioactive waste
eats a nuclear warhead,
the results can be absolutely explosive!

XORANDOR



CHRISTINE BROOKE-ROSE

A wonderous blend of science fiction, fact and humor.

"An engaging tour de force!...Comparable to such marvels as Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* and Russell Hoban's *Ridley Walker.*"
The New York Times

"A winner...definitely award material."
Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction

"Ingenious...a thoroughly gripping yarn."
London Observer

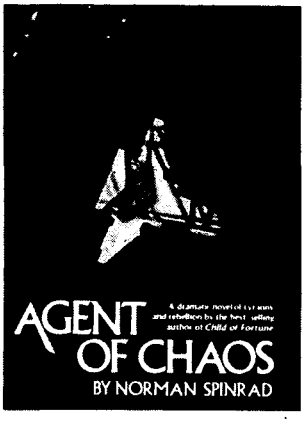
Available now from Avon Books! **$2.95 US ($3.95 Canada)**

AVON BOOKS The Hearst Corporation

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

FRANKLIN

Watts—the newest star in



"An amazing novelist"*

AGENT OF CHAOS

by Norman Spinrad

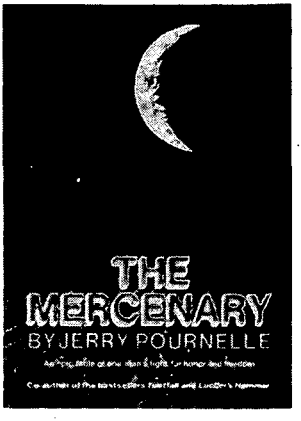
A dramatic novel of tyranny and rebellion by the best-selling author of *Child of Fortune.*

"A writer always on the cutting edge." *Winnipeg Sun**

"Spinrad is fast becoming the most exciting writer in...science fiction."
—Detroit News

"Refreshing, iconoclastic."
—The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction

$16.95



"A parable for our times"*

THE MERCENARY

by Jerry Pournelle

The epic fable of one man's fight for honor and freedom—at last in hardcover!

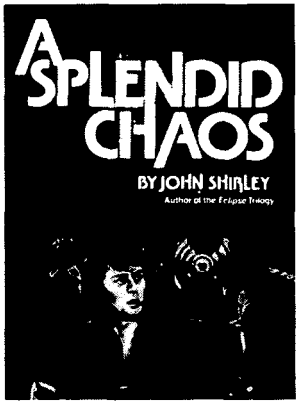
"More than a good science fiction adventure yarn...Its realism about politics and war—all too rare these days...is both refreshing and thought-provoking."
—Poul Anderson.

"The dirt of politics, the evil of war, the loneliness of command, and the rewards of comradeship." *—Library Journal**

$17.95

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the Science Fiction Galaxy!



From the author of the widely praised *Eclipse* trilogy

A SPLENDID CHAOS

by John Shirley

In a world of pain, young refugees from Earth search for safety—and for truth.

"John Shirley achieves things that most writers would not dare to attempt."—Bruce Sterling

"One of the best new science fiction writers."—*Interzone Magazine*

"One of science fiction's most singular talents."—William Gibson, author of *Neuromancer*

$17.95

SCIENCE FICTION CLASSICS

THE STARS MY DESTINATION
Alfred Bester "No more exciting science fiction novel has ever been written."—*The Washington Post* $15.95

THE YEAR BEFORE YESTERDAY
Brian Aldiss "Looks back on his personal history."—*The New York Times* $16.95

THE JEHOVAH CONTRACT
Victor Koman "A novel of cosmic—and comic—proportions."—*Library Journal* $16.95

ALQUA DREAMS
Rachel Pollack "Captivating and original—*Science Fiction Chronicle* $16.95

BUDSPY
David Dvorkin "A 'what if' that works...smart, fast, and mean."—*Kirkus Reviews* $17.95

WARHAVEN
Elayn M. Harvey "Imaginative, lucidly written."—*Kirkus Reviews* $15.95

At bookstores everywhere, or order by mail

FRANKLIN **Watts**
Dept. SC
387 Park Avenue South
New York, NY 10016

Please send me copy(s) of the books indicated. Add $1.50 for postage and handling (and sales tax where applicable.)

___ ***AGENT OF CHAOS $16.95***
___ ***BUDSPY $17.95***
___ ***THE MERCENARY $17.95***
___ ***A SPLENDID CHAOS $17.95***
___ ***THE STARS MY DESTINATION $15.95***
___ ***THE YEAR BEFORE YESTERDAY $16.95***
___ ***THE JEHOVAH CONTRACT $16.95***
___ ***ALQUA DREAMS $16.95***
___ ***WARHAVEN $15.95***

☐ I've enclosed check or money order for $ _____

Charge to my ☐AMEX ☐VISA ☐MASTERCARD

Card Number _____

Signature _____ Exp. date _____

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

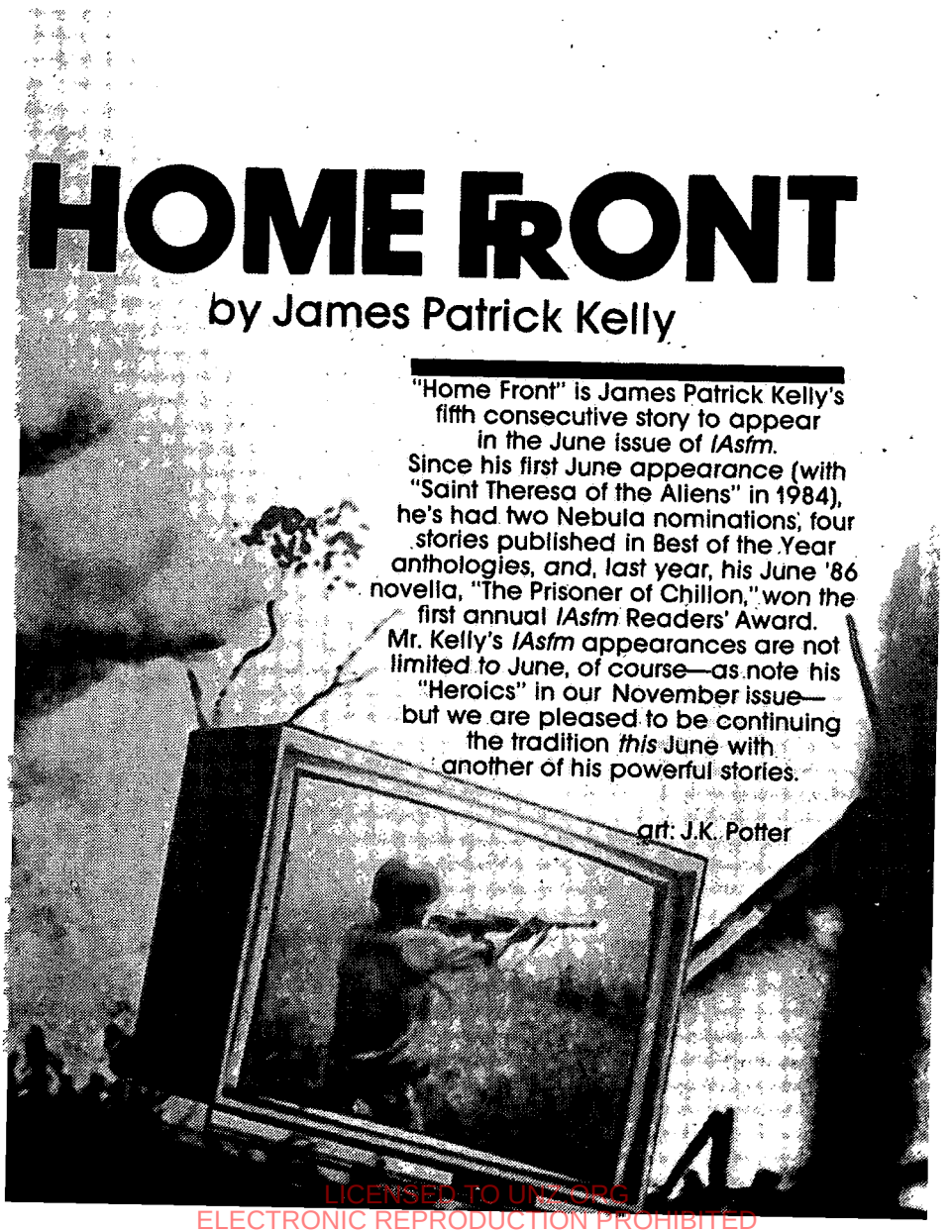
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

HOME FRONT

by James Patrick Kelly

"Home Front" is James Patrick Kelly's fifth consecutive story to appear in the June issue of *IAsfm*. Since his first June appearance (with "Saint Theresa of the Aliens" in 1984), he's had two Nebula nominations, four stories published in Best of the Year anthologies, and, last year, his June '86 novella, "The Prisoner of Chillon," won the first annual *IAsfm* Readers' Award. Mr. Kelly's *IAsfm* appearances are not limited to June, of course—as note his "Heroics" in our November issue—but we are pleased to be continuing the tradition *this* June with another of his powerful stories.

art: J.K. Potter



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Hey, Genius. What are you studying?"

Will hunched his shoulders and pretended not to hear. He had another four pages to review before he could test. If he passed, then he wouldn't have to log onto eighth grade again until Wednesday. He needed a day off.

"What are you, deaf?" Gogolak nudged Will's arm. "Talk to me, Genius."

"Don't call me that."

"Come on, Gogo," said the fat kid, whose name Will had forgotten. He was older: maybe in tenth, more likely a dropout. Old enough to have pimples. "Let's eat."

"Just a minute," said Gogolak. "Seems like every time I come in here, this needle is sitting in this booth with his face stuck to a schoolcomm. It's ruining my appetite. What is it, math? Español?"

"History." Will thought about leaving, going home, but that would only postpone the hassle. Besides, his mom was probably still there. "The Civil War."

"You're still on that? Jeez, you're slow. I finished that weeks ago." Gogolak winked at his friend. "George Washington freed the slaves so they'd close school on his birthday."

The big kid licked his lips and eyed the menu above the vending wall at the rear of the Burger King.

"Lincoln," said Will. "Try logging on sometime, you might learn something."

"What do you mean? I'm logged on right now." Gogolak pulled the comm out of his backpack and thrust it at Will. "Just like you." The indicator was red.

"It doesn't count unless someone looks at it."

"Then you look at it, you're so smart." He tossed the comm onto the table and it slid across, scattering a pile of Will's hardcopy. "Come on, Looper. Get out your plastic."

Will watched Looper push his ration card into the french-fry machine. He and Gogolak were a mismatched pair. Looper was as tall as Will, at least a hundred and ninety centimeters; Looper, however, ran to fat, and Will looked like a sapling. Looper was wearing official Johnny America camouflage and ripped jeans. He didn't seem to be carrying a schoolcomm, which meant he probably was warbait. Gogolak was the smallest boy and the fastest mouth in Will's class. He dressed in skintight style; everyone knew that girls thought he was cute. Gogolak didn't have to worry about draft sweeps; he was under age and looked it, and his dad worked for the Selective Service.

Will realized that they would probably be back to bother him. He hit save so that Gogolak couldn't spoil his afternoon's work. When they

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

returned to Will's booth, Looper put his large fries down on the table and immediately slid across the bench to the terminal on the wall. He stuck his fat finger into the coin return. Will already knew it was empty. Then Looper pressed select, and the tiny screen above the terminal lit up.

"Hey," he said to Will, "you still got time here."

"So?" But Will was surprised; he hadn't thought to try the selector. "I was logged on." He nodded at his comm.

"What did I tell you, Loop?" Gogolak stuffed Looper's fries into his mouth. "Kid's a genius."

Looper flipped channels past cartoons, plug shows, catalogs, freebies, music vids, and finally settled on the war. Johnny America was on patrol.

"Gervais buy it yet?" said Gogolak.

"Nah." Looper acted like a real fan. "He's not going to either; he's getting short. Besides, he's wicked smart."

The patrol trotted across a defoliated clearing toward a line of trees. With the sun gleaming off their helmets, they looked to Will like football players running a screen, except that Johnny was carrying a minimissile instead of a ball. Without warning, Johnny dropped to one knee and brought the launcher to his shoulder. His two rangefinders fanned out smartly and trained their lasers on the far side of the clearing. There was a flash; the jungle exploded.

"Foom!" Looper provided the sound effects. "Yah, you're barbecue, Pedro!" As a sapodilla tree toppled into the clearing, the time on the terminal ran out.

"Too bad," Gogolak poured salt on the table and smeared a fry in it. "I wanted to see the meat."

"Hey, you scum! That's my dinner." Looper snatched the fries pouch from Gogolak. "You hardly left me any."

He shrugged. "Didn't want them to get cold."

"Stand-ins." A girl in baggy blue disposables stood at the door and surveyed the booths. "Any stand-ins here?" she called.

It was oldie Warner's granddaughter, Denise, who had been evacuated from Texas and was now staying with him. She was in tenth and absolutely beautiful. Her accent alone could melt snow. Will had stood in for her before. Looper waved his hand hungrily until she spotted them.

"Martin's just got the monthly ration of toilet paper," she said. "They're limiting sales to three per customer. Looks like about a half-hour line. My grandpa will come by at four-thirty."

"How much?" said Looper.

"We want nine rolls." She took a five out of her purse. "A quarter for each of you."

Will was torn. He could always use a quarter and he wanted to help

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

her. He wanted her to ask his name. But he didn't want to stand in line for half an hour with these stupid jacks.

Gogolak was staring at her breasts. "Do I know you?"

"I may be new in town, sonny—" she put the five on the table "—but you don't want to rip me off."

"Four-thirty." Gogolak let Looper take charge of the money. Will didn't object.

Martin's was just next door to the Burger King. The line wasn't bad, less than two aisles long when they got on. There were lots of kids from school standing in, none of them close enough to talk to.

"Maybe she got tired of using leaves," said Gogolak.

Looper chuckled. "Who is she?"

"Seth Warner's granddaughter," said Will.

"Bet she's hot." Gogolak leered.

"Warner's a jack," said Looper. "Pig-faced oldie still drives a car."

Most of the shelves in aisle 2 were bare. There was a big display of government surplus powdered milk, the kind they loaded up with all those proteins and vitamins and tasted like chalk. It had been there for a week and only three boxes were gone. Then more empty space, and then a stack of buckets with no labels. Someone had scrawled "Korn Oil" on them: black marker on bare metal. At the end of the aisle was the freezer section, which was mostly jammed with packages of fries. Farther down were microwave dinners for the rich people. They wound past the fries and up aisle 3, at the end of which Will could see Mr. Rodenets, the stock boy, dispensing loose rolls of toilet paper from a big cardboard box.

"How hard you think it is to get chosen Johnny America?" Looper said. "I mean really."

"What do you mean, really?" said Gogolak. "You think J.A. is real?"

"People die. They couldn't fake that kind of stuff." Looper's face got red. "You watch enough, you got to believe."

"Maybe," Gogolak said. "But I bet you have to know someone."

Will knew it wasn't true. Gogolak just liked to pop other people's dreams. "Mr. Dunnell swears they pick the team at random," he said.

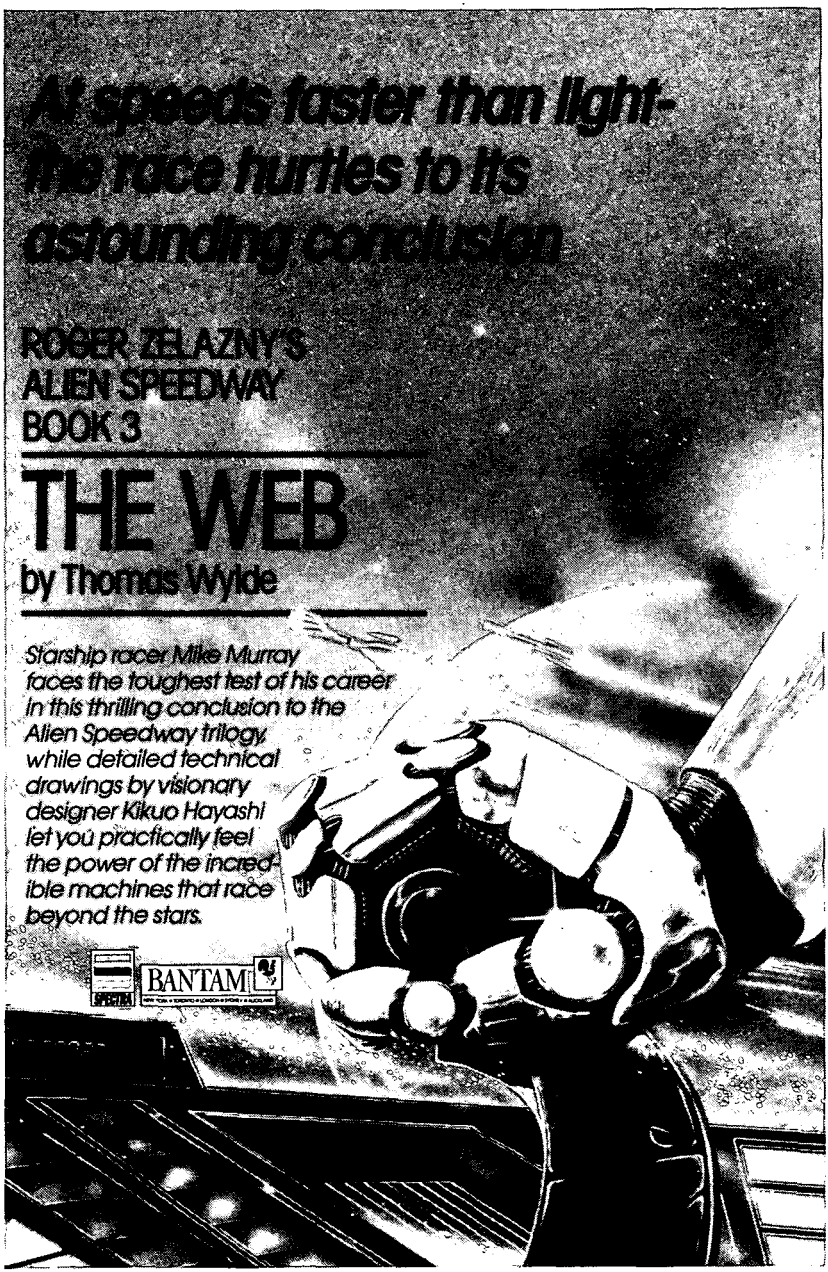
"Right," Gogolak said. "Whenever somebody gets dead."

"Who's Dunnell?" said Looper.

"Socialization teacher." Will wasn't going to let Gogolak run down Johnny America's team, no matter who his father was. "Most of them make it. I'll bet seventy percent at least."

"You think that many?" Looper nodded eagerly. "What I heard is they get discharged with a full boat. Whatever they want, for the rest of their lives."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED


At speeds faster than light-
the race hurtles to its
astounding conclusion
ROGER ZELAZNY'S
ALIEN SPEEDWAY
BOOK 3
THE WEB
by Thomas Wylde
Starship racer Mike Murray faces the toughest test of his career in this thrilling conclusion to the Alien Speedway trilogy, while detailed technical drawings by visionary designer Kikuo Hayashi let you practically feel the power of the incredible machines that race beyond the stars.
SPECTRA
BANTAM

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yeah, and Santa is their best friend," Gogolak said. "You sound like recruiters."

"It's not like I'd have to be J.A. himself. I just want to get on his team, you know? Like maybe in body armor." Looper swept his arm down the aisle with robotic precision, exterminating bacon bits.

"If only you didn't have to join the army," said Will.

Silence.

"You know," said Looper, "they haven't swept the Seacoast since last July."

A longer silence. Will figured out why Looper was hanging around Gogolak, why he had not complained more about the fries. He was hoping for a tip about the draft. Up ahead, Mr. Rodenets opened the last carton.

"I mean, you guys are still in school." Looper was whining now. "They catch me, and I'm southern front for sure. At least if I volunteer, I get to pick where I fight. And I get my chance to be Johnny."

"So enlist already." Gogolak was daring him. "The war won't last forever. We've got Pedro on the run."

"Maybe I will. Maybe I'm just waiting for an opening on the J.A. team."

"You ever see a fat Johnny with pimples?" said Gogolak. "You're too ugly to be a vid. Isn't that right, Mr. Rodenets?"

Mr. Rodenets fixed his good eye on Gogolak. "Sure, kid." He was something of a local character—Durham, New Hampshire's only living veteran of the southern front. "Whatever you say." He handed Gogolak three rolls of toilet paper.

Will's mom was watching cartoons when Will got home. She watched a lot of cartoons, mostly the stupid ones from when she was a girl. She liked the Smurfs and the Flintstones and Roadrunner. There was an inhaler on the couch beside her.

"Mom, what are you doing?" Will couldn't believe she was still home. "Mom, *it's quarter to five! You promised.*"

She stuck out her tongue and blew him a raspberry.

Will picked up the inhaler and took a whiff. Empty. "You're already late."

She held up five fingers. "Not 'til five." Her eyes were bright.

Will wanted to hit her. Instead he held out his hands to help her up. "Come on."

She pouted. "My shows."

He grabbed her hands and pulled her off the couch. She stood, tottered, and fell into his arms. He took her weight easily; she weighed less than he did. She didn't eat much.

"You've got to hurry," he said.

She leaned on him as they struggled down the hall to the bathroom;

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Will imagined he looked like Johnny America carrying a wounded buddy to the medics. Luckily, there was no one in the shower. He turned it on, undressed her, and helped her in.

"Will! It's cold, Will." She fumbled at the curtain and tried to come out.

He forced her back into the water. "Good," he muttered. His sleeves got wet.

"Why are you so mean to me, Will? I'm your mother."

He gave her five minutes. It was all that he could afford. Then he toweled her off and dressed her. He combed her hair out as best he could; there was no time to dry it. The water had washed all her brightness away, and now she looked dim and disappointed. More like herself.

By the time they got to Mr. Dunnell's house, she was ten minutes late. At night, Mr. Dunnell ran a freelance word-processing business out of his kitchen. Will knocked; Mr. Dunnell opened the back door, frowning. Will wished he'd had more time to get his mom ready. Strands of wet stringy hair stuck to the side of her face. He knew Mr. Dunnell had given his mom the job only because of him.

"Evening, Marie," Mr. Dunnell said. His printer was screeching like a cat.

"What so good about it?" She was always rude to him. Will knew it was hard for her, but she wouldn't even give Mr. Dunnell a chance. She went straight to the old Apple that Mr. Dunnell had rewired into a dumb terminal and started typing.

Mr. Dunnell came out onto the back steps. "Christ, Will. She's only been working for me three weeks and she's already missed twice and been late I don't know how many times. Doesn't she want this job?"

Will couldn't answer. He didn't say that she wanted her old job at the school back, that she wanted his father back, that all she really wanted was the shiny world she had been born into. He said nothing.

"This can't go on, Will. Do you understand?"

Will nodded.

"I'm sorry about last night."

Will shrugged and bit into a frozen fry. He was not sure what she meant. Was she sorry about being late for work or about coming home singing at three-twenty-four in the morning and turning on all the lights? He slicked a pan with oil and set it on the hot plate. He couldn't turn the burner to high without blowing a fuse but his mom didn't mind mushy fries. Will did; he usually ate right out of the bag when he was at home. He'd been saving quarters for a french fryer for her birthday. If he unplugged the hot plate, there'd be room for it on top of the dresser.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He wanted a microwave, too—but then they couldn't afford real microwave food. Someday.

His mom sat up in bed and ate breakfast without looking at it. The new tenants in the next bedroom were watching the war. Will could hear gunfire through the wall.

Normally this was the best time of day, because they talked. She would ask him about school. He told her the truth, mostly. He was the smartest kid in eighth, but she wasn't satisfied. She always wanted to know why he was not making friends. Will couldn't help it; he didn't trust rich kids. And then she would talk about . . . what she always talked about.

Today, however, Will didn't feel much like conversation. He complained half-heartedly that Gogolak was still bothering him.

"I'll bet you have him all wrong, Will."

"No way."

"Maybe he just wants to be your friend."

"The guy's a jack."

"It's hard on him, you know. Kids try to use him to get to his father. They're always pumping him for draft information."

"Well, I don't." Will thought about it. "How do you know so much anyway?"

"Mothers have their little secrets," she said with a sparkle. He hated it when she did that; she looked like some kind of starchy sitcom mom.

"You've never even met him."

She leaned over the edge of the bed and set her empty plate on the floor. "I ran into his father." She straightened up and began to sort through her covers. "He's worried about the boy."

"Was that who you were with last night?" Will threw a half-eaten fry back into the bag. "Gogolak's dad?"

"What I do after work is none of your business." She found her remote and aimed it at the screen. "We knew him before—your father and I. He's an old friend." A cartoon robot brought George Jetson a drink. "And he does work for Selective Service. He knows things."

"Don't try to help me, Mom."

"Look at that," she said, pointing to the screen. "He spills something and a robot cleans it up. You know, that's the way I always thought it would be when I was a kid. I always thought it would be clean."

"Mom—"

"I remember going to Disney World. It was so clean. It was like a garden filled with beautiful flowers. When they used to talk about heaven, I always thought of Disney World."

Will threw the bag at the screen and fries scattered across the room.

"Will!" She swung her legs out of bed. "What's wrong with you today? You all right, honey?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE EXCITING SEQUEL

to the *New York Times* bestseller, *Guardians of the West!*

The baby son of King Garion and Queen Ce'Nedra had been kidnapped by the mysterious Zandramas. With the sword bearing the powerful Orb of Aldur, Garion set out on his trail.

David Eddings' *King Of The Murgos,* on sale in April.

DEL REY A Del Rey Hardcover $16.95
Published by Ballantine Books

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He was through with her dumb questions. He didn't want to talk to her anymore. He opened the door.

"I said I was sorry."

He slammed it behind him.

It wasn't so much that it was Gogolak's dad this time. Will wasn't going to judge his mom; it was a free country. He wanted to live life, too—except that he wasn't going to make the same mistakes that she had. She was right in a way: it was none of his business who she made it with or what she sniffed. He just wanted her to be responsible about the things that mattered. He didn't think it was fair that he was the only grown-up in his family.

Because he had earned a day off from school, Will decided to skip socialization, too. It was a beautiful day and volleyball was a dumb game anyway, even if there were girls in shorts playing it. Instead he slipped into the socialization center, got his dad's old basketball out of his locker, and went down to the court behind the abandoned high school. It helped to shoot when he was angry. Besides, if he could work up any kind of jumper, he might make the ninth basketball team. He was already the tallest kid in eighth, but his hands were too small, and he kept bouncing the ball off his left foot. He was practicing reverse lay-ups when Looper came out of the thicket that had once been the baseball field.

"Hey, Will." He was flushed and breathing hard, as if he had been running. "How you doing?"

Will was surprised that Looper knew his name. "I'm alive."

Looper stood under the basket, waiting for a rebound. Will put up a shot that clanged off the rim.

"Hear about Johnny America?" Looper took the ball out to the foul line. "Old Gervais got his foot blown off. Stepped on a mine." He shot: swish. "Some one-on-one?"

They played two games and Looper won them both. He was the most graceful fat kid Will had ever seen. After the first game, Looper walked Will through some of his best post-up moves. He was a good teacher. By the end of the second game, sweat had darkened Looper's T-shirt. Will said he wouldn't mind taking a break. They collapsed in the shade.

"So they're recruiting for a new Johnny?" Will tried in vain to palm his basketball. "You ready to take your chance?"

"Who, me?" Looper wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. "I don't know."

"You keep bringing it up."

"Someday I've got to do something."

"Johnny Looper." Will made an imaginary headline with his hands.

"Yeah, right. How about you—ever think of joining? You could, you're

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tall enough. You could join up today. As long as you swear that you're fifteen, they'll take you. They'll take anyone. Remember Johnny Stanczyk? He was supposed to have been thirteen."

"I heard he was fourteen."

"Well, he looked thirteen." Looper let a caterpillar crawl up his finger. "You know what I'd like about the war?" he said. "The combat drugs. They make you into some kind of superhero, you know?"

"Superheroes don't blow up."

Looper fired the caterpillar at him.

Will's conscience bothered him for saying that; he was starting to sound like Gogolak. "Still, it is our country. Someone has to fight for it, right?" Will shrugged. "How come you dropped out, anyway?"

"Bored." Looper shrugged. "I might go back, though. Or I might go to the war. I don't know." He swiped the basketball from Will. "I don't see you carrying a comm today."

"Needed to think." Will stood and gestured for his ball.

"Hey, you hear about the lottery?" Looper fired a pass.

Will shook his head.

"They were going to announce it over the school channels this morning; Gogo tipped me yesterday. Town's going to hire twenty kids this summer. Fix stuff, mow grass, pick up trash, you know. Buck an hour—good money. You got to go register at the post office this afternoon, then next month they pick the lucky ones."

"Kind of early to think about the summer." Will frowned. "Bet you that jack Gogolak gets a job."

Looper glanced at him. "He's not that bad."

"A jack. You think he worries about sweeps?" Will didn't know why he was so angry at Looper. He was beginning to like Looper. "He's probably rich enough to buy out of the draft if he wants. He gets everything his way."

"Not everything." Looper laughed. "He's short."

Will had to laugh too. "You want to check this lottery out?"

"Sure." Looper heaved himself up. "Show you something on the way over."

There was blood on the sidewalk. A crowd of about a dozen had gathered by the abandoned condos on Coe Drive to watch the EMTs load Seth Warner into the ambulance which was parked right behind his Peugeot. Will looked for Denise but didn't see her. A cop was recording statements.

"I got here just after Jeff Roeder." Mrs. O'Malley preened as she spoke into the camera; it had been a long time since anyone paid attention to her. "He was lying on the sidewalk there, all bashed up. The car door was open and his disk was playing. Jeff stayed with him. I ran for help."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The driver shut the rear doors of the ambulance. Somebody in the crowd called out, "How is he?"

The driver grunted. "Wants his lawyer." Everyone laughed.

"Must've been a fight," Jeff Roeder said. "We found this next to him." He handed the cop a bloody dental plate.

"Did anyone else here see anything?" The cop raised her voice.

"I would've liked to've seen it," whispered the woman in front of Will. "He's one oldie who had it coming." People around her laughed uneasily. "Shit. They all do."

Even the cop heard that. She panned the crowd and then slammed the Peugeot's door.

Looper grinned at Will. "Let's go." They headed for Madbury Road.

"He wanted me to get in the car with him," Looper said as they approached the post office. "He offered me a buck. Didn't say anything else, just waved it at me."

Will wished he were somewhere else.

"A stinking buck," said Looper. "The pervert."

"But if he didn't say what he wanted . . . maybe it was for a stand-in someplace."

"Yeah, sure." Looper snorted. "Wake up and look around you." He waved at downtown Durham. "The oldies screwed us. They wiped their asses on the world. And they're still at it."

"You're in deep trouble, Looper." No question Looper had done a dumb thing, yet Will knew exactly how the kid felt.

"Nah. What are they going to do? Pull me in and say 'You're fighting on the wrong front, Johnny. Better enlist for your own good.' No problem. Maybe I'm ready to enlist now, anyway." Looper nodded; he looked satisfied with himself. "It was the disk, you know. He was playing it real loud and tapping his fingers on the wheel like he was having a great time." He spat into the road. "Boomer music. I hate the damn Beatles, so I hit him. He was real easy to hit."

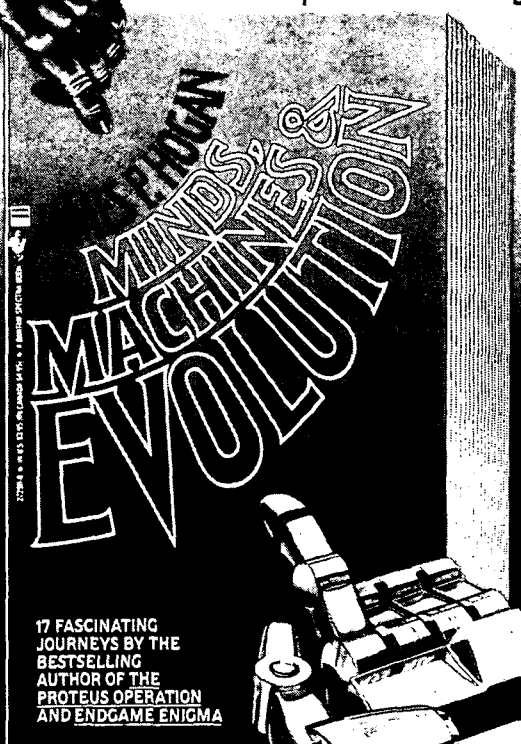
There was already a ten-minute line at the post office and the doors hadn't even opened yet. Mostly it was kids from school who were standing in, a few dropouts like Looper and one grown-up, weird Miss Fisher. Almost all of the kids with comms were logged on, except that no one paid much attention to the screens. They were too busy chatting with the people around them. Will had never mastered the art of talking and studying at the same time.

They got on line right behind Sharon Riolli and Megan Brown. Sharon was in Will's class, and had asked him to a dance once when they were in seventh. Over the summer he had grown thirteen centimeters. Since then she'd made a point of ignoring him; he looked older than he was. Old enough to fight.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mindbending science and future-perfect fiction

by the bestselling author of
The Proteus Operation and *Endgame Enigma*


J.P. HOGAN
MINDS, MACHINES & EVOLUTION
17 FASCINATING JOURNEYS BY THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE PROTEUS OPERATION AND ENDGAME ENIGMA

Here is James Hogan's most haunting and fanciful fiction along with his inspired speculations on nuclear energy, artificial intelligence, and scientific mysticism —together, a unique odyssey into the mind of one of the major science-fiction writers of our time.

BANTAM

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"When are they going to open up?" said Looper.

"Supposed to be one-thirty," said Megan. "Hi, Will. We missed you at socialization."

"Hi, Megan. Hi, Sharon."

Sharon developed a sudden interest in fractions.

"Have you seen Denise Warner?" said Will.

"The new kid?" Megan snickered. "Why? You want to ask her out or something?"

"Her grandpa got into an accident up on Coe Drive."

"Hurt?"

"He'll live." Looper kept shifting from foot to foot as if the sidewalk was too hot for him.

"Too bad." Sharon didn't look up.

"Hey, Genius. Loop." Gogolak cut in front of the little kid behind Looper, some stiff from sixth who probably wasn't old enough for summer work anyway. "Hear about Gervais?"

"What happened?" said Sharon. Will noticed that she paid attention to Gogolak.

"Got his foot turned into burger. They're looking for a new Johnny."

"Oh, war stuff." Megan sniffed. "That's all you guys ever talk about."

"I think a girl should get a chance," said Sharon.

"Yeah, sure," said Looper. "Just try toting a launcher through the jungle in the heat."

"I could run body armor." She gave Looper a pointed stare. "Something that takes brains."

The line behind them stretched. It was almost one-thirty when Mr. Gogolak came running out of the side door of the post office. The Selective Service office was on the second floor. He raced down the line and grabbed his kid.

"What are you doing here? Go home." He grabbed Gogolak's wrist and turned him around.

"Let go of me!" Gogolak struggled. It had to be embarrassing to be hauled out of a job line like some stupid elementary school kid.

His dad bent over and whispered something. Gogolak's eyes got big. A flutter went down the line; everyone was quiet, watching. Mr. Gogolak was wearing his Selective Service uniform. He pulled his kid into the street.

Mr. Gogolak had gone to the western front with Will's dad. Mr. Gogolak had come back. And last night he had been screwing Will's mom. Will wished she were here to see this. They were supposed to be old friends, maybe he owed her a favor after last night. But the only one Mr. Gogolak whispered to was *his* kid. It wasn't hard to figure out what he had said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Gogolak gazed at Looper and Will in horror. "It's a scam!" he shouted. "Recruiters!"

His old man slapped him hard and Gogolak went to his knees. But he kept shouting even as his father hit him again. "Draft scam!" They said a top recruiter could talk a prospect into anything.

Will could not bear to watch Mr. Gogolak beat his kid. Will's anger finally boiled over; he hurled his father's basketball and it caromed off Mr. Gogolak's shoulder. The man turned, more surprised than angry. Will was one hundred and ninety centimeters tall and even if he was built like a stick, he was bigger than this little grown-up. Lucky Mr. Gogolak, the hero of the western front, looked shocked when Will punched him. It wasn't a very smart thing to do but Will was sick of being smart. Being smart was too hard.

"My mom says hi." Will lashed out again and missed this time. Mr. Gogolak dragged his crybaby kid away from the post office. Will pumped his fist in triumph.

"Run! Run!" The line broke. Some dumb kid screamed, "It's a sweep!" but Will knew it wasn't. Selective Service had run this scam before: summer job, fall enlistment. Still, kids scattered in all directions.

But not everyone. Weird Miss Fisher just walked to the door to the post office like she was in line for ketchup. Bobby Mangann and Eric Orr and Danny Jarek linked arms and marched up behind her; their country needed them. Will didn't have anywhere to run to.

"Nice work." Looper slapped him on the back and grinned. "Going in?"

Will was excited; he had lost control and it had felt *great*. "Guess maybe I have to now." It made sense, actually. What was the point in studying history if you didn't believe in America? "After you, Johnny." ●

GAMING

(From page 16)

regularly accrues), you can launch a siege against the castle, hurling fire, disease, boulders. The goal here is to aim at the top of the castle wall at first, then to lower your aim, destroying the wall brick by brick.

Perhaps most fun are the tournaments, which can be engaged in for fame or money. Here the computer makes a good show of creating some "real time" suspense, with the jousters facing each other. You sit on your horse, lance raised, and gallop towards your opponent. You bounce in the saddle, trying to hold your lance firmly, and aim for the other knight's shield. Again, it is decidedly difficult to unseat an opponent.

Like *Pirates!, Defender* offers a variety of game activities, exciting graphics, and a full-bodied plot that sets it apart from most arcade and strategy computer games. The problem with *Defender* is that the assorted games seem inordinately difficult, with no clear indication

(Continued on page 56)

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LAST CONTACT

by Jack McDevitt

We've seen a lot of stories which hope to capture the excitement and promise of our "first contact" with aliens. But here, instead, Jack McDevitt takes a poignant look at our "Last Contact," and the bittersweet legacy it inspires . . .

art: Janet Aulisio

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

They looked down through towering banks of cumulus at an ocean bright with sunlight. A mountainous archipelago broke the smooth curve of the horizon. "There were thousands like this in the crystals," said Wincavan. "Other *worlds*."

In the darkness behind him, Rotifer shifted his weight and sighed audibly.

"This is what they saw from the *Quandis* during their first day over Omyra. Later, after it had been settled, this world would become famous because its philosophers came to an understanding of man and his place in the universe."

Rotifer could not entirely conceal his contempt. "And what might that be?"

It was Wincavan's turn to sigh. "I think they concluded that it was man who gave purpose to the universe."

Rotifer laughed. It was an ugly sound, loaded with derision.

"They never found anyone else," Wincavan explained. "Among all those worlds, they never saw a reflection that was not their own."

He fell silent for long moments. The islands passed beneath them, lovely verdant growths in the endless sea. "No, you're right to sneer. But I'd like to believe that we served some humble cause: herald, perhaps, or torchbearer. A pathfinder for something greater than ourselves, who will find our bones among the stars, and know that we were there."

Rotifer swung round in his chair, away from the images. "Emory, I love your stories. But the truth is that there's only one world, and you're standing on it."

"No." Wincavan's eyes fell shut, and he shuddered. "We are not even native to this world."

The younger man shrugged. "It hardly matters."

A blue line of peaks appeared in the distance. Wrapped in winter, they marked a continental coastline. But it was a narrow range, and gave way quickly to rain forests and lake country. Broad rivers appeared. At the confluence of two of the largest, Camwyck would be built two centuries later. Her sons and daughters, for years after, would continue the great expansion through the stars. Oliver Candliss, whose bloody shirt lay in the museum upstairs, was born there.

Wincavan debated taking them lower, but he wanted to maintain the planetary perspective, which was the most enthralling part of the demonstration, save for the fight with the rikatak at the climax.

They moved well above the trailing cumulus. The texture of light changed and darkened as they swept out again over open sea. "Nice effects," said Rotifer.

Wincavan nodded patiently. Too much was at stake to offend the Councilman now.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A canopy of stars appeared, unfamiliar constellations. Far below, silent lightning flickered. "Eventually," said Wincavan, "this world will be ablaze with cities."

Rotifer's patience was running short. "How do you know?" he asked tiredly. He himself was no longer young. His eyes had grown cold and hard in the harsh winters. His hair and beard had gone gray, and the limp was more pronounced than ever. (The leg injury had been sustained in his first cavalry action against the goliats, when he had been clawed and bitten.) He tended to be querulous, especially when the nights were damp, and he judged his worth exclusively by a long series of victories achieved against the savages many years before. Rotifer was, to Wincavan's mind, a prime example of the result when a hero outlives his campaigns.

"Because I once saw the record. It was in one of the crystals," he said, with rising heat, "that were auctioned off during my grandfather's time!"

"Ah, yes," the Councilman said slowly, as though he had caught Wincavan in a deception, "of course, it would have been in one of the jewels."

There were more mountains in the west. They were silver under the stars, and silent. Beyond them, a pale ruddy glow stained the horizon. Rotifer, who had never seen a moonrise, watched a surge of crimson light fill the spaces between the peaks, watched the long arc of Omyra's twin companion push above them. His breathing changed. "What's that?" he asked, his voice pitched a bit higher than usual.

"A second world," breathed Wincavan. "It circles the first."

"A world in the sky?" The Councilman laughed, though Wincavan thought he detected a hollowness in the sound. "It's nonsense, Emory. How can you continue to take any of this seriously?"

Wincavan knew how they all felt about him: deranged old man shut up in one of the ancient theaters, unable to grasp the difference between the light shows and reality. But the Hall was no theater. The Community had known that once. His grandfather had remembered when there'd been a small coterie of supporters, of men and women who actively pursued research into the Great Days. But that was long ago. Now he was alone, save for the savage goliats, who occasionally climbed the outside walls to peer timidly at the images. "Why," he asked wearily, "do you deny the evidence of your eyes?"

"Because it is only a show. Like all the others. Because there is only one world; because an ocean can't cling to a globe. Why doesn't it run off the bottom of the world, Wincavan?"

Wincavan hesitated. "I don't know," he admitted.

"I thought not."

"We had that knowledge once."

"Contained in one of the jewels, no doubt?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Wincavan shrugged. "The sun sets each evening in the west. Can you explain how it gets back during the night into the eastern sky?"

"There's a tunnel," Rotifer said hesitantly. "Beneath the world."

"You don't believe that?"

"It makes as much sense as living upside down." He stared at Wincavan, trying to read his expression in the semidarkness. "Do you have pictures of oceans and forests on the other world as well? The one in the sky?"

"We used to." The crystal was now set in a gold clasp, and the last time Wincavan had seen it, it was dangling between the ample breasts of Banda Pier, wife of the Stablemaster.

The upper clouds of Omyra floated below them. Wincavan could feel the weight of the turning planet. He knew that the major land mass lay directly below, an enormous continent of sulphurous mountains, broad rock-strewn plains, and advancing icecaps.

"The *Quandis* circled the world ninety-three times before the landing team went down." He paused, and looked toward the approaching dawn. Rotifer was silent, crossing his arms across his thick chest. "On the fourth day, Memori Collin and Lex Esteban and Creel MacAido boarded one of the ship's launches. They were right about *here*—" He pushed a stud forward. The stars lurched, and Omyra's cloudscape rotated. "It looked more or less like this," he said, smiling as the Councilman gripped the arms of his chair and pushed back into his seat.

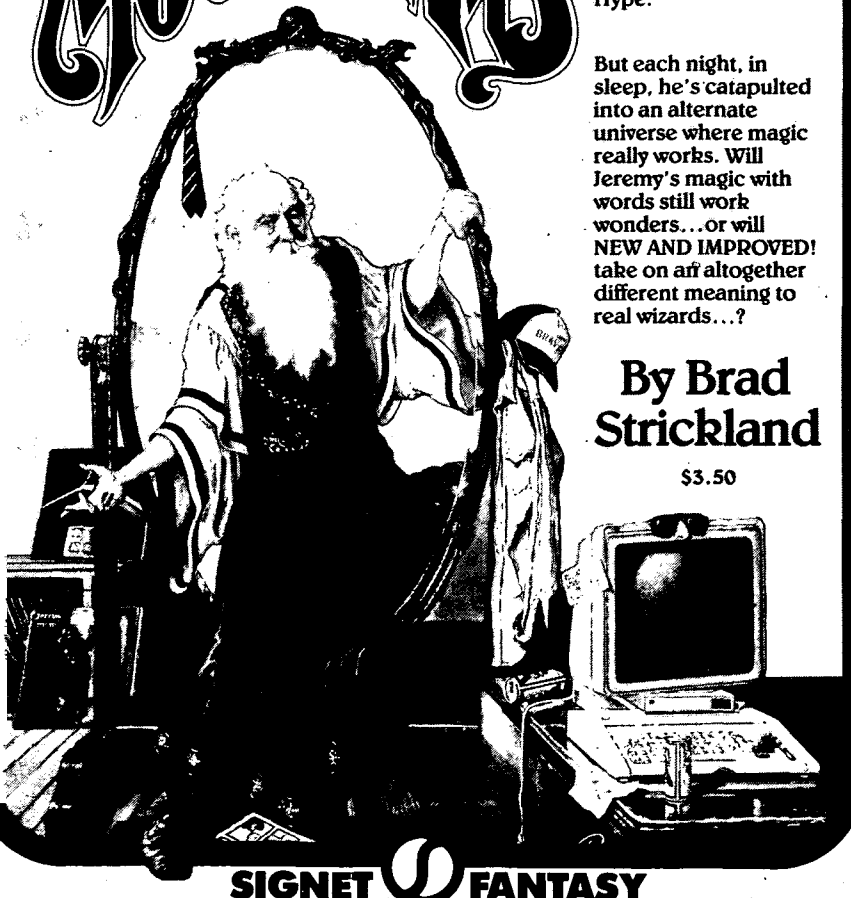
The hull of the *Quandis*, black in the sunlight, appeared overhead, and they sank into the clouds. Rotifer was trying to look away, but they dropped down the sky with terrifying speed. Even after all these years, after a thousand flights, Wincavan thrilled to the maneuver. They fell and fell and Rotifer made a strange sound; then they were out over water again, their descent slowing, the ocean far below churned by heavy rain. The sudden squall shook the vessel.

"This is the view from the landing vehicle," he explained, shouting although there was no need to. Was it his imagination that, during the final moments of the maneuver, his seat pushed against him? Turning to glimpse his guest, Wincavan caught instead a flurry of movement through a window. Two, or possibly three, goliats had climbed the courtyard wall, from where it was possible to watch the images. It was a perch which they frequently assumed. But he had long since given up trying to lure them inside. "In a moment you'll see a large island shaped somewhat like a running man." He used the electronic pointer. "There. You can make out one arm, and the head's over here, bent forward because he's moving very quickly. We'll be landing near the right kneecap. Collin chose it because it has a level plain, without too many trees or other

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Is the magic of Madison Avenue any match for the real thing?

MOONDREAMS



On Earth, Jeremy Sebastian Moon is a seller of dreams. Advertising dreams. Hype.

But each night, in sleep, he's catapulted into an alternate universe where magic really works. Will Jeremy's magic with words still work wonders...or will NEW AND IMPROVED! take on an altogether different meaning to real wizards...?

By Brad Strickland

$3.50

SIGNET FANTASY

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

obstructions, and she knew from experience how important it was to be able to see clearly in all directions."

"Who's Collin?" asked the Councilman in a shaky voice.

"She commands the landing team," he said.

They drifted in over the island. The sea was very green, and it rolled leisurely across white beaches. The storm was gone. Tall, yellowish, bulbous growths dotted the landscape.

"Odd-looking trees," observed Rotifer.

"Ship's records say they're some sort of big fungus."

They paused over a landscape bloated with grotesque growths. A landing strut appeared. Then the camera angle changed, and they were looking out to sea.

We're down. It was Memori Collin's voice, whispery with excitement. It was always the same with her: Wincavan had followed her onto more than thirty worlds. He wasn't sure about the sequence; that information, along with so much else, seemed forever beyond his reach. It was in the crystals somewhere, but most of them were scattered now. All within reach, within a mile or so; but they might as well have been on Omyra.

For now it didn't matter. What mattered was this magnificent moment: Collin and Esteban and MacAido emerging from their mystical cocoon into an unknown land. They were cool and crisp and efficient. Yet he knew that they shared his own eagerness.

All green. It was Creel MacAido's voice this time. He could never listen to MacAido without the knowledge that he would die horribly on Mindilmas in full view of the cameras. He looked *much* older on Mindilmas, so Wincavan could console himself with the thought that that terrible event was still far in the future. It was a landing Wincavan still possessed, though he never watched it.

Rotifer of course could not understand their exchanges, and in fact did not even grasp the concept of other languages. The context, however, rendered translation unnecessary.

They looked through the windows of the launch at the seascape, at rocks washed smooth by the tides, at soft-shelled creatures basking in the late afternoon sun, at the line of sinuous growths that marked the edge of a fern forest.

To Wincavan, who knew what was coming, it was an ominous perspective.

The view changed again, and they could see the forward hatch. It slid open to reveal Memori Collin, long-legged, dark-skinned, lovely. She wore a uniform like the ones enclosed in the glass cases on the second level. It was of a single piece, green and white, with the torch logo prominent on her right shoulder.

It might have been that symbol: the tall, proud flame which appeared

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

on uniforms, on equipment, on the great starships themselves—and which was still emblazoned on a half-dozen plaques which were mounted in strategic places throughout the Hall— It might have been that symbol which first suggested to Wincavan the fond hope that man may after all have a role to play. That the race which had itself failed might eventually serve as an inspiration to a successor. What else was there to hope for?

The wind caught at her short black hair as she stepped out, and briefly bared the nape of her neck. She carried a weapon, black and polished and lethal, in one hand. She glanced toward them, and Rotifer leaned forward. "Nice looking bitch," he said. Wincavan's knuckles whitened, but he said nothing.

Collin strode away from the shadow of the lander with precision and self-assurance. The rikatak was only minutes away. Wincavan, who knew where to look, also knew that everything would be okay. Nevertheless he felt his pulse begin to pick up.

"They were good," said Rotifer. "I have to admit that: they were good. Look at these images. How did they do it?" He shook his head, and glanced toward Wincavan in a comradely way. "One day we'll pry out their secrets."

"Not if you keep auctioning them off," said Wincavan. "There's not much left now."

"Some of this stuff might have direct military application. Can you imagine what it would do to the goliats if we could produce stuff like this?" He waved his hand in the air, as though clearing an obstruction. "I was born too soon. We have a great future, Emory. It's just a matter of time."

"Yes," grumbled Wincavan.

"If we could just understand how they did some of these things. How the lights work. Why most of the buildings are warm in winter and cool in summer. I'm convinced there's a single principle at work in all of this. Find that principle, and we will have their secrets!" He shook his head sadly. "I know, Emory, that you're pleased to think no one but you cares about the Ancients. But that's simply not true. The difference between you and me is the difference between science and religion. Reality and dream. We need to see the Ancients for what they were, to approach them with an open mind!"

It would come from a small cluster of vegetation, surrounding a pair of thick-boled squat trees. Wincavan had watched this scene many times out of some morbid fascination. Peering into the cluster of thick growths, he believed he could make out the creature's forelegs.

Creel MacAido appeared at Collin's side. He was tall, thin, almost boyish, with vivid green eyes. And he loved her. Wincavan could see it

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in the chemistry between the two, and he could also see that his feelings were not returned.

He spoke to her. Something about the landscape, but Wincavan's command of their language was not complete. It was apparent, from the tone, that the meaning was independent of the words anyhow.

"What's happening?" asked Rotifer.

"They're about to be attacked. Can you see the danger?"

The Councilman was bent forward examining the scene when the rikatak leaped suddenly above the trees. He shrieked and fell back. The spindly multi-jawed creature continued to gain altitude, spreading paper-thin wings to the air, its red eyes fixed apparently on Wincavan himself. Six stick-like legs trailed after it. It might have been a graceful creature save for the viscous orange liquid that spilled over several rows of teeth.

Neither Collin nor MacAido moved. Wincavan was never certain whether he was watching the result of marvelous discipline or stark panic. The rikatak was drifting down now. Suddenly a translucent web popped into the air beneath it, connected by the thinnest of threads to its mantle.

The scene darkened, as though a cloud had drifted across the sun. "Run!" roared Rotifer. "Get the hell out of there!"

Collin and MacAido simultaneously hit the ground. Hot light exploded, the web separated from the creature and fell gracefully. Wincavan stared up at it: the thing pulsed and breathed with a life of its own. Long tendrils trailed down.

"Poison," said Rotifer, his fighting instincts coming to the fore.

It settled over its victims.

The air grew cloudy and red, and it became hard to see. Blue light tracked up from the ground, a terrible chittering struck Wincavan with physical force, and everything became confused in a swirl of blood and motion. Then the place went dark.

The sounds of the struggle continued. "The equipment got knocked out," Wincavan explained. Moments later, the picture was back, and the thing was down, dragging shattered legs, trying to get at Collin with its jaws. She lay on her back, heels dug in to anchor herself, looking for a clear shot past the tangle of fangs and limbs.

The web had attacked MacAido. He fought frantically for the pistol, which lay a meter or so away. But each movement drew his captor more tightly about him. It lurched every few moments, in a reflexive spasm, until his strangled breathing filled the Hall. He'd succeeded in keeping one arm free, but it was winding strands round his neck when he found the weapon.

He fired twice over Collin's shoulder. Another unearthly shriek erupted.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MANKIND'S LAST LINE OF DEFENSE.
THE FLEET
The new science fiction shared world anthology edited by
David Drake and Bill Fawcett
With characters and stories created by such science fiction luminaries as Piers Anthony, Gary Gygax, Anne McCaffrey, Margaret Weis, and more, The Fleet captures the excitement of interstellar battle and collaborative writing like no other series ever has! $3.50
Look for The Fleet: Counterattack, coming in November '88!
ACE
MAY
THE #1 PUBLISHER OF SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It was enough. Collin got the opening she needed. She blew the head apart with a quick salvo, and went to MacAido's assistance. By then Esteban had joined the fight. Wincavan heard Rotifer exhale as they cut the last of the web from MacAido.

"Nice weapons," Rotifer said. "*We* could use something like that."

Wincavan smiled. Memori Collin's pistol lay upstairs, across the room from Candliss's shirt.

"Good," the Councilman said, pulling himself together. "Not quite on the level of some of the stuff Gavandy runs on weekends, but it isn't bad."

"Gavandy's images are *stories*," said Wincavan, barely able to contain his frustration.

"So are *these* stories!" Rotifer stared hard at the older man. "For God's sake, Emory, can't you see that? Listen: if any of this were true, if we really came from worlds floating in the sky, what happened? *What happened?* What are we doing *here?* Where is everybody?"

Wincavan touched a presspad, the image died, the lights came on, and the sedate amphitheater returned. "I don't know," he said.

"You don't have many answers, do you?"

Wincavan walked down onto the apron where the rikatak had stood. "Who built the City?" he asked quietly.

"The Ancients. And I know they could do quite a lot that we can't, but that proves nothing."

"Where did they go?" persisted Wincavan. "They must once have been much more numerous than we! The City is bigger than we can *ride* across in a day. It could have held many communities like ours."

"They died off. Probably a war. Or plague."

"Maybe you're right. And whatever happened, maybe it extended far beyond here. Marc, I think we're all that's left."

Rotifer got up. It was cool, and he pulled his jacket around his shoulders. "I'm sorry, Emory," he said. "But I don't think this conversation is going anywhere. The Council needs money, and we have either to collect more taxes, or run another auction. Probably, we'll have to do both."

"Come on, Marc." Wincavan was on his feet. "Damn it, there are only a dozen left now."

Rotifer's eyes narrowed. "Emory, it really doesn't matter. Even if you were right, I don't think anyone would want to be reminded."

Snow was falling into the courtyard. Rotifer unhitched his mount, patted the wassoon's head at the base of its horns, swung into the saddle, and shook his cloak free. He glanced at Wincavan. Then he flicked the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

reins and rode out through the stone gate, the storm swirling in his track.

Wincavan shut the door.

He wandered through the ancient structure, past the Projector and the Machines and the sleek furniture that relentlessly outlived the generations of men. He climbed the stairs to the second level, stopped to make tea, and crossed to the museum.

Save for the amphitheater, the broad chamber on the second level was the largest room in the Hall. It was filled with uniforms, goblets, patches, statuary, black shining instruments whose use Wincavan could not guess, set in locked display cases, with illumination operated by push buttons. Faded murals hung on the walls. They were the only things in the room that seemed to have yielded to time. Nevertheless, it was possible to make out their subjects: cylindrical objects floating against backgrounds of stars and worlds; people standing beside machines in bizarre landscapes; a trail of fire drawn across a peaceful evening sky.

Two portraits dominated the rest. A man and a woman, both wore the uniform of the explorers. They were clear-eyed and handsome, and Wincavan wondered who they might have been. Perhaps, he thought, they represented all who had gone down to unknown worlds from the great ships.

He paused before the blood-splattered shirt of Oliver Candliss. Curiously, the identifying plate carried only his name, and the notation, *Salinas*, as though its significance were obvious. Wincavan had walked with that bearded giant into dark Kahjadan, had ridden with him in the electrical skies over a black thing that engulfed whole suns, had accompanied him into the unearthly Gray Temple on Willamine which (if he understood the documents correctly) had never after received human visitors.

He paused over a silver urn, from which Abbas Ti and his team had drunk Micondian brandy before departing on their magnificent rescue of the *Toller*. There was pottery from the Ingundian Mines, and a row of incisors from a dragon. He smiled wickedly: no one else knew that there were such things! What visions he could induce into the smug dreams of the townspeople if he wished.

(As he walked among the gleaming cases, he felt the eyes of the goliats on his back. He knew from long experience that, if he turned quickly, there would again be only the blur of motion, dimly perceived. But in the morning, he often saw their tracks atop the walls and even in the courtyard. He would have liked to believe they were drawn by something other than light displays.)

Memori Collin's pistol lay under glass near the window. It was a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

smaller weapon than one might have guessed from the images. But its tapering snout looked no less deadly than when it had killed the rikatak.

He would have to be careful to keep it away from the auctioneers. He wondered whether he didn't have a civic responsibility to turn it over to the town for defense against the goliats. It would be a deadly surprise to the barbarians, who were accustomed to facing only spears, arrows, and rocks. Still, he didn't like to think of Rotifer's faction with such a weapon. No way to be sure which way it might be pointed.

A framed document was centered on the long wall. The stylistic design of the characters prevented his reading much of it. But it seemed to be a charter. An imprint of the Torch that Collin and Candliss and all the rest wore on their sleeves was set in the lower left corner. There were about thirty rows of text, followed by half a dozen signatures. At the head of the document, in its title, he could make out one word. It was "SURVEY."

Wincavan loved the warm familiarity of the room. It was the place to which he had come when his son died, uselessly and long ago, in a skirmish with the goliats. And it was here, long before their marriage, that he'd realized how much he loved Ceola.

He remembered the last auction. That had occurred two years before, also as a result of the Council's reluctance to raise taxes. The items in the museum were not understood, and consequently of little value to the townspeople. So they had been spared. Only the crystals, those lovely gems that burned with the light of the stars, commanded substantial prices.

At that time they'd sold off twelve, half the remaining collection. (In his grandfather's time, there'd been several hundred of the objects. If family tradition was correct, no two had been precisely the same hue.)

Now, when Wincavan attended a recital or the theater, he inevitably saw them. Mountainous Andakar was squeezed into the cleavage of the wife of the chief of police; Morinai, with her mysterious abandoned cities, adorned the hair of a tanner's daughter; and R Leonis III, home of the mightiest sea creatures the survey ships had seen, decorated a tradesman's belt buckle.

Wincavan stared out the window at the West Road. It curved past the Hall, into the trees and the dark hills beyond, past the Community farms, into the Wilderness. It was constructed of the same durable material from which most of the ancient structures were built. For the most part, it was in good condition: there were few breaks or holes, although it deteriorated somewhat as one got further from the City.

Snow was falling on it now.

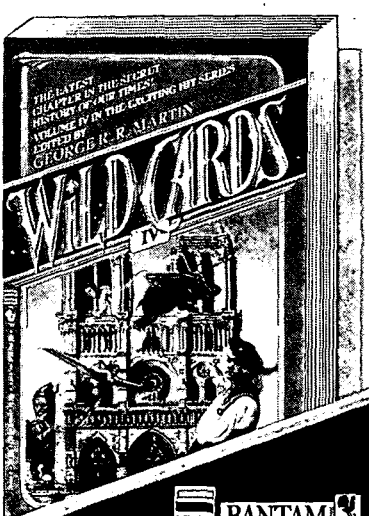
In another age, before travel became so dangerous, he and his father,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A winning hand dealt by eleven of science fiction's most gifted authors.

WILD CARDS IV ACES ABROAD

Under the editorship of Hugo and Nebula Award-winning author George R.R. Martin, the Wild Cards adventure continues. The Aces, endowed by the Wild Card virus with superhuman powers, and the Jokers, tormented by the same virus with bizarre mental and physical deformities, now face new challenges as they seek out Aces and Jokers in other lands. Their quest is a journey destined to amaze, terrify, amuse and enlighten us all.


THE LATEST CHAPTER IN THE SECRET HISTORY OF OUR TIMES.
NOW BEING TOLD IN THE EXCITING HIT SERIES
EDITED BY GEORGE R.R. MARTIN
WILD CARDS
IV
BANTAM

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mounted on wassoons, had penetrated far along the road, had in fact reached Grimrock's foothills. Those were good days, in some ways the best of his life, and that trip had come somehow to signal his transition from childhood.

They had fished and hunted, and even spent an evening with the goliats. The creatures had been friendly enough, purring their outlandish songs in a tongue no human had ever learned. But Wincavan had watched the firelight dance in their dark cats' eyes, and recoiled from the disquieting smiles that were simultaneously engaging and ominous. He'd devoured their steaming meat, and drunk dark wine from a carved flagon that they'd given him afterward to keep. (It still stood proudly atop his mantle.)

And their females: they were lovely sinuous creatures whose claws flashed while they danced in the firelight. Wincavan recalled the embarrassment with which he as a child had discovered his manhood asserting itself toward inferior beings. Pity: it was an urge he'd never satisfied. Such things were not done, at least not openly. So the years had passed, and he'd lost the capability before shedding the inhibition.

No matter.

He drew up the window. Flakes flew into the room. The cold air felt very good.

Somewhere down the West Road, several days away, he and his father had found a tower and a group of connected outbuildings. They were on the prairie, twelve hours' travel from the edge of the forest. The structure had been visible from two days away, had soared against the sky when they stood at its base, taller by far than anything in the City. The sun had blinded them from its mirror walls. But the pools that surrounded it held brackish water and stinging insects.

The heating system had worked, so they'd spent the night inside. The interior was cavernous: enormous spaces which could have contained several times the entire Community. (There had been a group of goliats with them, but they'd shunned the building and gone on.) What he remembered most: somewhere in the complex, a door creaked and banged in the wind. They'd gone looking for it in the morning, and found it in back of a wide empty building that would have made a good granary. His father had been unable to fix the door, and had instead removed it, and laid it in the long grass.

Since then, Wincavan had seen similar complexes in the histories. And he had for many years dreamed of going back, to learn whether there might not be a ship hidden away somewhere in a secret place.

He stood a long time by the window.

Just before midnight, he made up his mind, trembling, and drew on

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a shirt. He plucked a heavy robe and some clothes from his closet and, in bare feet, padded down the spiraling stairs to the first level. He circled the outer wall of the amphitheater, which dominated most of the ground floor. In the rear of the building lay the repository, a long narrow room whose walls provided storage cubicles for the crystals. Rows upon rows stood empty now. But here and there, the survivors glittered in the cold light.

Wincavan unfolded the robe and laid it atop a cabinet.

He wondered which of his forebears had found the combination to open the cubicles. The code was a family secret that was passed from generation to generation. He himself, childless now, had long ago made preparations to pass the information to his sister's son, whom he felt worthy.

One by one, he removed the crystals: lush Omyra; dark, haunted Sycharis; milky Ossia, bone-white home of the epic poet Kolminthi (whose works are as lost as his world); Candliss's beloved Kahjadan . . . . They warmed his palms, and his eyes misted with the certainty that he would not see their magnificent phantoms again in this life. He wrapped them in his clothes, remote Endikali in a shirt, drowned Sensien in a sock, Shalinol and Moritaigne and bleak Mindilmas (where MacAido had given his life) in a pair of trousers with patches on both knees.

When he had finished and tied them all together, he returned to his room and dressed. He debated taking the goliat flagon with him. On this final night in the Hall, he realized it was all he had left of his father, and so he stuffed it into a pocket. Then he secured what provisions he could, hauled everything out to the stable which he'd helped his grandfather build, and lashed it down on Armagon's flanks.

The big wassoon watched him curiously, pawing at the soft clay, bending its head to the saddle. It snorted when he led it out into the snow.

He went back for his scarf and a hat, and, in an afterthought, returned to the museum. His family had never learned the codes to open the display cases in that sacred room; or if one of his forefathers had, he'd not passed it on.

Wincavan strode lovingly down the gleaming aisles, trailing fingertips on the cases. Somehow dust never settled there. He paused before Memori Collin's black weapon, sheathed in a matching holster, resting against red cloth and the ages. Her name was stark and silver on the bronze plate, above five digits he knew were a date but which meant nothing to him. Somewhere in the room he heard a sob, and he picked up a chair and brought it down hard against the case.

It shuddered, and bent.

He hit it again, shattering the chair, spewing wood and fabric across the bright surface. He beat the case until it collapsed, and the weapon spilled out onto the carpeted floor.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He went down on his knees, touched the cool black metal with his fingertips, and slid it out of the holster. It was heavier than he would have guessed. The grip slipped down into his palm, and his index finger curled round the trigger. Still squatting, he extended the weapon, peering through the sight, and slowly swung it round the room, as though an invisible enemy lurked somewhere among its shining exhibits. His head bobbed with satisfaction, and he took it downstairs and tested it against the courtyard wall.

The thing came alive with power, and a narrow white beam sliced through the stone. Satisfied that he had adequate protection against goliats, who were now very much to be feared, or any of the few carnivores that would not hesitate to attack a lone man, he slid it into his coat. Hero's weapon. In a sense, Rotifer had been right: Wincavan did have a taste for magic.

He left the front door unlocked, so they wouldn't have to break it down. Then, bending his head into the falling snow, he mounted the wassoon, steered it out of the courtyard, and turned onto the West Road, toward the forest and Grimrock.

The woods quickly engulfed him. The only sounds were the muffled whump of Armagon's hooves, the whisper of snow falling into the trees, and the rasp of his own breathing. He pulled his fur-lined hood over his head, and tightened the drawstrings. Soon the land started to rise.

He crossed the wooden bridge over the Malumet, trudged by the farms and the Battle Green (no one knew why it was so named), tasted the large wet flakes, and began to count the cost of his actions.

The tower was terribly far. In good weather, in the summer of his youth, it had been a long, exhausting trek. For an old man, weighed down with despair, it was hopeless.

He rode until almost dawn, to put distance between himself and the Community. If experience held, the appraisers would arrive at the Hall in the late morning to begin preparing for the auction. When they discovered he was missing, they would assume he had fled into the gaunt structures of the inner City, and they would search there. No one would expect him to leave the warm confines of the ancient buildings. There was, after all, no other place in the world where a man could live.

Nevertheless, Wincavan was cautious. Fearing the possibility of pursuit, he made his camp behind a heavy thicket, using one of the light tapestries of the City Builders to set up a lean-to, pitching it against a fallen tree. It sheltered both himself and—to some extent—Armagon. He tried to build a fire, but the wind came from all directions, and the driving snow smothered the flames. Finally he gave up, wrapped himself in his blankets, and drifted wearily to sleep.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Because It's a Jungle Out There

Fang and claw. Tentacle and paw. Beasts, bugs and creatures of all kind. At last — the ***GURPS Bestiary***.

Drawing on creatures from prehistoric, modern and mythological backgrounds, ***GURPS Bestiary*** adds new dimensions to your gaming no matter where or when your campaign is set. Complete stats and descriptions for more than 200 creatures are included to help you use animals in any campaign. There are also new rules on hunting, trapping, venom, animals in combat, pets and familiars, as well as guidelines for creating new creatures.

Lavishly illustrated with over 100 drawings, the beasts are extensively cross-referenced by habitat — forest, mountains, plains, jungles, deserts and oceans. A complete table of contents and index are included plus a Table of Creatures to give you all the important stats at a glance.

Ask your retailer for this and other great ***GURPS*** products. ***GURPS Bestiary*** is a supplement to the ***GURPS Basic Set*** — you need both in order to play.

If your local store doesn't have our products, send $12.50 for ***GURPS Bestiary*** to order by mail (postpaid). The ***GURPS Basic Set*** is available for $27.50. (Texas residents please add sales tax of $1.00 and $2.20 respectively.) Send a long SASE for our free catalog.

STEVE JACKSON GAMES
BOX 18957 – J
AUSTIN, TEXAS 78760

GURPS is a registered trademark of Steve Jackson Games Incorporated

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

* * *

In the morning he woke stiff and cold. The storm had blown itself out, but the sun was a yellow smear in an overcast sky. He got the fire going this time, put on a pot of coffee, and a slab of veal. Then he pushed swollen feet down into his boots.

He was on his way quickly enough, driven by falling temperatures and the growing certainty that he would die if he could not reach the tower quickly. And yet, the risk entailed nothing so deadly as remaining in a Hall bereft of its living phantoms, confronting the terrible awareness of a future limited to Rotifer's practicalities. Surely it was better to die out here than to stagger on from year to dreary year, burdened by his knowledge. In a sense, he was perhaps the last of the race of men, direct descendant of those who had tamed, and somehow lost, a universe. (Memori Collin's metal weapon lay against his ribs.)

The crystals, still wrapped in his clothes, swayed gently on either flank of the wassoon.

He pulled his scarf up and wrapped it about his face. Saliva leaked into the garment and froze. A few flurries blew up, and the wind rattled the trees constantly. Occasionally he heard the sounds of large animals, but he saw only smaller fur-bearing creatures, and the brightly colored winter birds.

The hood he wore was quite long, designed for severe weather. He might have been looking out of a tunnel, and the illusion carried some comfort. He tried to withdraw into a corner of his mind, away from the stiffening fingers and aching muscles and erratic lungs. His clothing grew heavy, and his heart pounded.

Periodically, he dismounted and walked. Armagon watched with luminous brown eyes, slowing his own pace to match.

The second night was better. The clouds had cleared off, but the cold hard stars brought bitter temperatures with them. Wincavan quit early, got his shelter up, and slept by a steady fire.

In the morning he considered going back. He even turned the wassoon around, having thought he'd made up his mind to end the foolishness and save his life. But they'd gone only a few steps when he stopped, sat indecisively aboard his mount for perhaps ten minutes, and swung his head once more to the west.

Hour after hour, he searched the horizon for mountains. He would see them first, as long as the weather stayed clear, and then, a few hours later, the tower! But even after that it would be at least two days' journey!

Hopeless! My God, it had been hopeless from the start.

In the end, he was overtaken by hallucinations, enhanced perhaps by

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the gentle rhythm of muscle and sinew on which he rode. His father traveled beside him, and occasionally there was a third rider: sometimes it was Oliver Candliss, sometimes Memori Collin.

They wore their uniforms, and sat straight on their mounts, urging him forward, eyes trained on the west. Grimrock is there, Emory! You don't see it because your eyes are old now. But it is not far. Keep on.

On the fourth day, late in the afternoon, he fell out of the saddle. Deep snow cushioned him from serious injury, but he twisted both his left elbow and knee. He limped badly after that, and the arm never stopped hurting.

It became necessary to stop every couple of hours, to put up his shelter and build a fire to warm himself.

He came to regret his rashness, to regret it with all his heart. But in other, perhaps less rational moments, when his invisible companions rode with him, he seemed never to have known a higher pride, never to have experienced a deeper pleasure.

The frigid air stung his lungs, and his coat became an intolerable weight. While he counted his heartbeats, Memori Collin's message changed: *Emory*, she whispered, her voice very like the wind moving across the snowfields, *all we ever were rides with you.* And he realized, yes, if I die it will be as though none of them ever lived.

And he knew it was so: tears squeezed from his eyes and froze on his cheeks, and gasping in the knife air he urged the big animal on.

So they rode together, Emory Wincavan and his father (younger than he remembered) and Oliver Candliss and Memori Collin. In time the sharp edge of the cold diminished. The reins grew slack in his hands, and the world filled with the steady tread of the wassoon. Even the hallucinations disintegrated, until there was nothing but Armagon, the snow, and the knowledge of what he carried.

It was dark.

He clung to the creature's furry neck, vaguely aware of its warmth. And his last thought, as the saddle slipped away from him, was whispered into the animal's ear: *Forgive me. . . .*

The goliats found him in the spring. Nearby lay the carcass of the mount.

They burned him in accordance with tradition although, since he was a hostile, they could not invoke the blessings of the spirits of the place where he had fallen.

Memori Collin's pistol burned unseen with him, and when the flames drove the temperature of the pile sufficiently high, it exploded, startling the onlookers.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

They recovered the crystals and distributed them among the females, who admired them greatly, and put them aside for the solstice festival.

The flagon they knew as their own.

There was one among the goliats who recognized the old man's features, who remembered the great hall at the edge of the Ruin, and the lambent specters which flickered within its western chamber. After some difficulty, he acquired one of the jewels, possibly summer green Omyra, and inserted it into a rough leather pouch, which he tied to his belt, and carried regularly with him.

And in time, when the goliats drove their enemies into the prairies to the north and east, he had occasion again to visit that haunted place. It was now cold and dark, and he stood long in the moonlight. "Thank you, Old One," he whispered, so softly his words were lost on the wind. "Where you have walked, we will follow." ●

GAMING

(From page 35)

of how to improve one's performance. (After repeated trials, I still failed to win a joust—and the rule book offers little advice.) Ultimately, you're left with the feeling that the actual game play was sacrificed for the graphics. Microprose's *Pirates!*, faced with the same design premise, offers a much more involving game while still providing variety and clever graphics.

Also of interest is *Legacy of the Ancients* (Electronic Arts). When it first arrived, I pretty much assumed that the game was just another (ho-hum) dungeon crawl. Which it is . . . sort of.

But there are some intriguing innovations. It's graphically more interesting, with nicely animated torches in the dark hallways, and detailed monsters and opponents that are light-years removed from the blurry pixies of most fantasy role-playing games.

But *Legacy* has other things to set it apart. The "dungeon" is actually the Tarmalon Galactic Museum, one of dozens that are found throughout the known universe. The museum features viewscreens that reveal different aspects of the planet Tarmalon as you venture deeper into the museum.

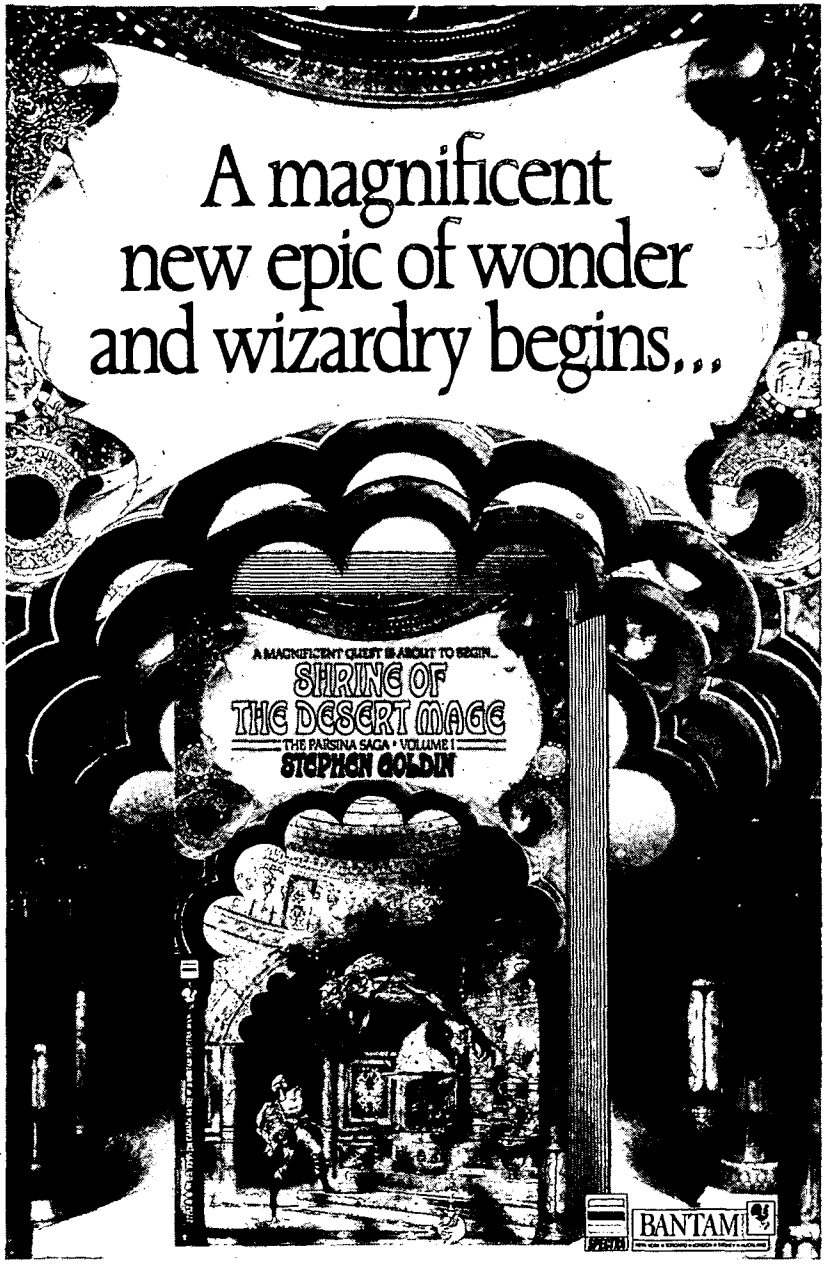
But the view screens can only be accessed by special codes. The game comes with a wheel that, when aligned with the proper gemstones listed on the outer ring, reveals the access code for different screens inside the museum.

Like most fantasy games, *Legacy* offers towns—twelve of them, in this case—with banks, weapons shops, buy-back shops, and, very useful, a lending institution.

The object of your quest is something called "The Wizard's Compendium" currently owned by the evil Baron of Kent.

Both *Legacy* and *Defender* add new dimensions to the sometimes tired tradition of fantasy computer games. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED


A magnificent new epic of wonder and wizardry begins...
A MAGNIFICENT QUEST IS ABOUT TO BEGIN...
SHRINE OF THE DESERT MAGE
THE PARSINA SAGA • VOLUME I
STEPHEN GOLDIN
BANTAM

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

STABLE STRATEGIES FOR MIDDLE MANAGEMENT

by Eileen Gunn

Eileen Gunn's stories have appeared in *Amazing*, and in two anthologies: *Proteus* and *Tales by Moonlight*. Ms. Gunn tells us that she considers the following to be a slice of life. We hope this doesn't mean that major corporations have already implemented her stable strategies.

art: Marc Davis

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Our cousin the insect has an external skeleton made of shiny brown chitin, a material that is particularly responsive to the demands of evolution. Just as bioengineering has sculpted our bodies into new forms, so evolution has shaped the early insect's chewing mouthparts into her descendants' chisels, siphons, and stilettos, and has molded from the chitin special tools—pockets to carry pollen, combs to clean her compound eyes, notches on which she can fiddle a song.

From the popular science program *Insect People!*

I awoke this morning to discover that bioengineering had made demands upon me during the night. My tongue had turned into a stiletto, and my left hand now contained a small chitinous comb, as if for cleaning a compound eye. Since I didn't have compound eyes, I thought that perhaps this presaged some change to come.

I dragged myself out of bed, wondering how I was going to drink my coffee through a stiletto. Was I now expected to kill my breakfast, and dispense with coffee entirely? I hoped I was not evolving into a creature whose survival depended on early-morning alertness. My circadian rhythms would no doubt keep pace with any physical changes, but my unevolved soul was repulsed at the thought of my waking cheerfully at dawn, ravenous for some wriggly little creature that had arisen even earlier.

I looked down at Greg, still asleep, the edge of our red and white quilt pulled up under his chin. His mouth had changed during the night too, and seemed to contain some sort of a long probe. Were we growing apart?

I reached down with my unchanged hand and touched his hair. It was still shiny brown, soft and thick, luxurious. But along his cheek, under his beard, I could feel patches of sclerotin, as the flexible chitin in his skin was slowly hardening to an impermeable armor.

He opened his eyes, staring blearily forward without moving his head. I could see him move his mouth cautiously, examining its internal changes. He turned his head and looked up at me, rubbing his hair slightly into my hand.

"Time to get up?" he asked. I nodded. "Oh, God," he said. He said this every morning. It was like a prayer.

"I'll make coffee," I said. "Do you want some?"

He shook his head slowly. "Just a glass of apricot nectar," he said. He unrolled his long, rough tongue and looked at it, slightly cross-eyed. "This is real interesting, but it wasn't in the catalog. I'll be sipping lunch from flowers pretty soon. That ought to draw a second glance at Duke's."

"I thought account execs were expected to sip their lunches," I said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Not from the flower arrangements . . ." he said, still exploring the odd shape of his mouth. Then he looked up at me and reached up from under the covers. "Come here."

It had been a while, I thought, and I had to get to work. But he did smell terribly attractive. Perhaps he was developing aphrodisiac scent glands. I climbed back under the covers and stretched my body against his. We were both developing chitinous knobs and odd lumps that made this less than comfortable. "How am I supposed to kiss you with a stiletto in my mouth?" I asked.

"There are other things to do. New equipment presents new possibilities." He pushed the covers back and ran his unchanged hands down my body from shoulder to thigh. "Let me know if my tongue is too rough."

It was not.

Fuzzy-minded, I got out of bed for the second time and drifted into the kitchen.

Measuring the coffee into the grinder, I realized that I was no longer interested in drinking it, although it was diverting for a moment to spear the beans with my stiletto. What was the damn thing for, anyhow? I wasn't sure I wanted to find out.

Putting the grinder aside, I poured a can of apricot nectar into a tulip glass. Shallow glasses were going to be a problem for Greg in the future, I thought. Not to mention solid food.

My particular problem, however, if I could figure out what I was supposed to eat for breakfast, was getting to the office in time for my ten AM meeting. Maybe I'd just skip breakfast. I dressed quickly and dashed out the door before Greg was even out of bed.

Thirty minutes later, I was more or less awake and sitting in the small conference room with the new marketing manager, listening to him lay out his plan for the Model 2000 launch.

In signing up for his bioengineering program, Harry had chosen specialized primate adaptation, B-E Option No. 4. He had evolved into a text-book example: small and long-limbed, with forward-facing eyes for judging distances and long, grasping fingers to keep him from falling out of his tree.

He was dressed for success in a pin-striped three-piece suit that fit his simian proportions perfectly. I wondered what premium he paid for custom-made. Or did he patronize a ready-to-wear shop that catered especially to primates?

I listened as he leaped agilely from one ridiculous marketing premise to the next. Trying to borrow credibility from mathematics and engineering, he used wildly metaphoric bizspeak, "factoring in the need for

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pipeline throughput," "fine-tuning the media mix," without even cracking a smile.

Harry had been with the company only a few months, straight from business school. He saw himself as a much-needed infusion of talent. I didn't like him, but I envied his ability to root through his subconscious and toss out one half-formed idea after another. I know he felt it reflected badly on me that I didn't join in and spew forth a random selection of promotional suggestions.

I didn't think much of his marketing plan. The advertising section was a textbook application of theory with no practical basis. I had two options: I could force him to accept a solution that would work, or I could yes him to death, making sure everybody understood it was his idea. I knew which path I'd take.

"Yeah, we can do that for you," I told him. "No problem." We'd see which of us would survive and which was hurtling to an evolutionary dead end.

Although Harry had won his point, he continued to belabor it. My attention wandered—I'd heard it all before. His voice was the hum of an air conditioner, a familiar, easily ignored background noise. I drowsed and new emotions stirred in me, yearnings to float through moist air currents, to land on bright surfaces, to engorge myself with warm, wet food.

Adrift in insect dreams, I became sharply aware of the bare skin of Harry's arm, between his gold-plated watchband and his rolled-up sleeve, as he manipulated papers on the conference room table. He smelled greasily delicious, like a pepperoni pizza or a charcoal-broiled hamburger. I realized he probably wouldn't taste as good as he smelled, but I was hungry. My stiletto-like tongue was there for a purpose, and it wasn't to skewer cubes of tofu. I leaned over his arm and braced myself against the back of his hand, probing with my stylets to find a capillary.

Harry noticed what I was doing and swatted me sharply on the side of the head. I pulled away before he could hit me again.

"We were discussing the Model 2000 launch. Or have you forgotten?" he said, rubbing his arm.

"Sorry. I skipped breakfast this morning." I was embarrassed.

"Well, get your hormones adjusted, for chrissake." He was annoyed, and I couldn't really blame him. "Let's get back to the media allocation issue, if you can keep your mind on it. I've got another meeting at eleven in Building Two."

Inappropriate feeding behavior was not unusual in the company, and corporate etiquette sometimes allowed minor lapses to pass without pursuit. Of course, I could no longer hope that he would support me on moving some money out of the direct-mail budget. . . .

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

* * *

During the remainder of the meeting, my glance kept drifting through the open door of the conference room, toward a large decorative plant in the hall, one of those oases of generic greenery that dot the corporate landscape. It didn't look succulent exactly—it obviously wasn't what I would have preferred to eat if I hadn't been so hungry—but I wondered if I swung both ways?

I grabbed a handful of the broad leaves as I left the room and carried them back to my office. With my tongue, I probed a vein in the thickest part of a leaf. It wasn't so bad. Tasted green. I sucked them dry and tossed the husks in the wastebasket.

I was still omnivorous, at least—female mosquitoes don't eat plants. So the process wasn't complete. . . .

I got a cup of coffee, for company, from the kitchenette and sat in my office with the door closed and wondered what was happening. The incident with Harry disturbed me. Was I turning into a mosquito? If so, what the hell kind of good was that supposed to do me? The company didn't have any use for a whining loner.

There was a knock at the door, and my boss stuck his head in. I nodded and gestured him into my office. He sat down in the visitor's chair on the other side of my desk. From the look on his face, I could tell Harry had talked to him already.

Tom Samson was an older guy, pre-bioengineering. He was well versed in stimulus-response techniques, but had somehow never made it to the top job. I liked him, but then that was what he intended. Without sacrificing authority, he had pitched his appearance, his gestures, the tone of his voice, to the warm end of the spectrum. Even though I knew what he was doing, it worked.

He looked at me with what appeared to be sympathy, but was actually a practiced sign stimulus, intended to defuse any fight-or-flight response. "Is there something bothering you, Margaret?"

"Bothering me? I'm hungry, that's all. I get short-tempered when I'm hungry."

Watch it, I thought. He hasn't referred to the incident; leave it for him to bring up. I made my mind go bland and forced myself to meet his eyes. A shifty gaze is a guilty gaze.

Tom just looked at me, biding his time, waiting for me to put myself on the spot. My coffee smelt burnt, but I stuck my tongue in it and pretended to drink. "I'm just not human until I've had my coffee in the morning." Sounded phony. Shut up, I thought.

This was the opening that Tom was waiting for. "That's what I wanted to speak to you about, Margaret." He sat there, hunched over in a relaxed way, like a mountain gorilla, unthreatened by natural enemies. "I just

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

talked to Harry Winthrop, and he said you were trying to suck his blood during a meeting on marketing strategy." He paused for a moment to check my reaction, but the neutral expression was fixed on my face and I said nothing. His face changed to project disappointment. "You know, when we noticed you were developing three distinct body segments, we had great hopes for you. But your actions just don't reflect the social and organizational development we expected."

He paused, and it was my turn to say something in my defense. "Most insects are solitary, you know. Perhaps the company erred in hoping for a termite or an ant. I'm not responsible for that."

"Now, Margaret," he said, his voice simulating genial reprimand. "This isn't the jungle, you know. When you signed those consent forms, you agreed to let the B-E staff mold you into a more useful corporate organism. But this isn't nature, this is man reshaping nature. It doesn't follow the old rules. You can truly be anything you want to be. But you have to cooperate."

"I'm doing the best I can," I said, cooperatively. "I'm putting in eighty hours a week."

"Margaret, the quality of your work is not an issue. It's your interactions with others that you have to work on. You have to learn to work as part of the group. I just cannot permit such backbiting to continue. I'll have Arthur get you an appointment this afternoon with the B-E counselor." Arthur was his secretary. He knew everything that happened in the department and mostly kept his mouth shut.

"I'd be a social insect if I could manage it," I muttered as Tom left my office. "But I've never known what to say to people in bars."

For lunch I met Greg and our friend David Detlor at a health-food restaurant that advertises fifty different kinds of fruit nectar. We'd never eaten there before, but Greg knew he'd love the place. It was already a favorite of David's, and he still has all his teeth, so I figured it would be okay with me.

David was there when I arrived, but not Greg. David works for the company too, in a different department. He, however, has proved remarkably resistant to corporate blandishment. Not only has he never undertaken B-E, he hasn't even bought a three-piece suit. Today he was wearing chewed-up blue jeans and a flashy Hawaiian shirt, of a type that was cool about ten years ago.

"Your boss lets you dress like that?" I asked.

"We have this agreement. I don't tell her she has to give me a job, and she doesn't tell me what to wear."

David's perspective on life is very different from mine. And I don't think it's just that he's in R&D and I'm in Advertising—it's more basic

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

than that. Where he sees the world as a bunch of really neat but optional puzzles put there for his enjoyment, I see it as . . . well, as a series of SATs.

"So what's new with you guys?" he asked, while we stood around waiting for a table.

"Greg's turning into a goddamn butterfly. He went out last week and bought a dozen Italian silk sweaters. It's not a corporate look."

"He's not a corporate *guy*, Margaret."

"Then why is he having all this B-E done if he's not even going to use it?"

"He's dressing up a little. He just wants to look nice. Like Michael Jackson, you know?"

I couldn't tell whether David was kidding me or not. Then he started telling me about his music, this barbershop quartet that he sings in. They were going to dress in black leather for the next competition and sing Shel Silverstein's "Come to Me, My Masochistic Baby."

"It'll knock them on their tails," he said gleefully. "We've already got a great arrangement."

"Do you think it will win, David?" It seemed too weird to please the judges in that sort of a show.

"Who cares?" said David. He didn't look worried.

Just then Greg showed up. He was wearing a cobalt blue silk sweater with a copper green design on it. Italian. He was also wearing a pair of dangly earrings shaped like bright blue airplanes. We were shown to a table near a display of carved vegetables.

"This is great," said David. "Everybody wants to sit near the vegetables. It's where you sit to be *seen* in this place." He nodded to Greg. "I think it's your sweater."

"It's the butterfly in my personality," said Greg. "Headwaiters never used to do stuff like this for me. I always got the table next to the espresso machine."

If Greg was going to go on about the perks that come with being a butterfly, I was going to change the subject.

"David, how come you still haven't signed up for B-E?" I asked. "The company pays half the cost, and they don't ask questions."

David screwed up his mouth, raised his hands to his face, and made small, twitching, insect gestures, as if grooming his nose and eyes. "I'm doing okay the way I am."

Greg chuckled at this, but I was serious. "You'll get ahead faster with a little adjustment. Plus you're showing a good attitude, you know, if you do it."

"I'm getting ahead faster than I want to right now—it looks like I won't be able to take the three months off that I wanted this summer."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Three months?" I was astonished. "Aren't you afraid you won't have a job to come back to?"

"I could live with that," said David calmly, opening his menu.

The waiter took our orders. We sat for a moment in a companionable silence, the self-congratulation that follows ordering high-fiber foodstuffs. Then I told them the story of my encounter with Harry Winthrop.

"There's something wrong with me," I said. "Why suck his blood? What good is that supposed to do me?"

"Well," said David, "*you* chose this schedule of treatments. Where did you want it to go?"

"According to the catalog," I said, "the No. 2 Insect Option is supposed to make me into a successful competitor for a middle-management niche, with triggerable responses that can be useful in gaining entry to upper hierarchical levels. Unquote." Of course, that was just ad talk—I didn't really expect it to do all that. "That's what I want. I want to be in charge. I want to be the boss."

"Maybe you should go back to BioEngineering and try again," said Greg. "Sometimes the hormones don't do what you expect. Look at my tongue, for instance." He unfurled it gently and rolled it back into his mouth. "Though I'm sort of getting to like it." He sucked at his drink, making disgusting slurping sounds. He didn't need a straw.

"Don't bother with it, Margaret," said David firmly, taking a cup of rosehip tea from the waiter. "Bioengineering is a waste of time and money and millions of years of evolution. If human beings were intended to be managers, we'd have evolved pin-striped body covering."

"That's cleverly put," I said, "but it's dead wrong."

The waiter brought our lunches, and we stopped talking as he put them in front of us. It seemed like the anticipatory silence of three very hungry people, but was in fact the polite silence of three people who have been brought up not to argue in front of disinterested bystanders. As soon as he left, we resumed the discussion.

"I mean it," David said. "The dubious survival benefits of management aside, bioengineering is a waste of effort. Harry Winthrop, for instance, doesn't need B-E at all. Here he is, fresh out of business school, audibly buzzing with lust for a high-level management position. Basically he's just marking time until a presidency opens up somewhere. And what gives him the edge over you is his youth and inexperience, not some specialized primate adaptation."

"Well," I said with some asperity, "he's not constrained by a knowledge of what's failed in the past, that's for sure. But saying that doesn't solve my problem, David. Harry's signed up. I've signed up. The changes are under way and I don't have any choice."

I squeezed a huge glob of honey into my tea from a plastic bottle shaped

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

like a teddy bear. I took a sip of the tea; it was minty and very sweet. "And now I'm turning into the wrong kind of insect. It's ruined my ability to deal with Product Marketing."

"Oh, give it a rest!" said Greg suddenly. "This is *so* boring. I don't want to hear any more about corporate hugger-mugger. Let's talk about something that's fun."

I had had enough of Greg's lepidopterate lack of concentration. "Something that's *fun?* I've invested all my time and most of my genetic material in this job. This is all the goddamn fun there is."

The honeyed tea made me feel hot. My stomach itched—I wondered if I was having an allergic reaction. I scratched, and not discreetly. My hand came out from under my shirt full of little waxy scales. What the hell was going on under there? I tasted one of the scales; it was wax all right. Worker bee changes? I couldn't help myself—I stuffed the wax into my mouth.

David was busying himself with his alfalfa sprouts, but Greg looked disgusted. "That's gross, Margaret," he said. He made a face, sticking his tongue part way out. Talk about gross. "Can't you wait until after lunch?"

I was doing what came naturally, and did not dignify his statement with a response. There was a side dish of bee pollen on the table. I took a spoonful and mixed it with the wax, chewing noisily. I'd had a rough morning, and bickering with Greg wasn't making the day more pleasant.

Besides, neither he nor David has any real respect for my position in the company. Greg doesn't take my job seriously at all. And David simply does what he wants to do, regardless of whether it makes any money, for himself or anyone else. He was giving me a back-to-nature lecture, and it was far too late for that.

This whole lunch was a waste of time. I was tired of listening to them, and felt an intense urge to get back to work. A couple of quick stings distracted them both: I had the advantage of surprise. I ate some more honey and quickly waxed them over. They were soon hibernating side by side in two large octagonal cells.

I looked around the restaurant. People were rather nervously pretending not to have noticed. I called the waiter over and handed him my credit card. He signaled to several bus boys, who brought a covered cart and took Greg and David away. "They'll eat themselves out of that by Thursday afternoon," I told him. "Store them on their sides in a warm, dry place, away from direct heat." I left a large tip.

I walked back to the office, feeling a bit ashamed of myself. A couple days of hibernation weren't going to make Greg or David more sympathetic to my problems. And they'd be real mad when they got out.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I didn't use to do things like that. I used to be more patient, didn't I? More appreciative of the diverse spectrum of human possibility. More interested in sex and television.

This job was not doing much for me as a warm, personable human being. At the very least, it was turning me into an unpleasant lunch companion. Whatever had made me think I wanted to get into management anyway?

The money, maybe.

But that wasn't all. It was the challenge, the chance to do something new, to control the total effort instead of just doing part of a project. . . .

The money too, though. There were other ways to get money. Maybe I should just kick the supports out from under the damn job and start over again.

I saw myself sauntering into Tom's office, twirling his visitor's chair around and falling into it. The words "I quit" would force their way out, almost against my will. His face would show surprise—feigned, of course. By then I'd have to go through with it. Maybe I'd put my feet up on his desk. And then—

But was it possible to just quit, to go back to being the person I used to be? No, I wouldn't be able to do it. I'd never be a management virgin again.

I walked up to the employee entrance at the rear of the building. A suction device next to the door sniffed at me, recognized my scent, and clicked the door open. Inside, a group of new employees, trainees, were clustered near the door, while a personnel officer introduced them to the lock and let it familiarize itself with their pheromones.

On the way down the hall, I passed Tom's office. The door was open. He was at his desk, bowed over some papers, and looked up as I went by.

"Ah, Margaret," he said. "Just the person I want to talk to. Come in for a minute, would you." He moved a large file folder onto the papers in front of him on his desk, and folded his hands on top of them. "So glad you were passing by." He nodded toward a large, comfortable chair. "Sit down."

"We're going to be doing a bit of restructuring in the department," he began, "and I'll need your input, so I want to fill you in now on what will be happening."

I was immediately suspicious. Whenever Tom said "I'll need your input," he meant everything was decided already.

"We'll be reorganizing the whole division, of course," he continued, drawing little boxes on a blank piece of paper. He'd mentioned this at the department meeting last week.

"Now, your group subdivides functionally into two separate areas, wouldn't you say?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Well—"

"Yes," he said thoughtfully, nodding his head as though in agreement. "That would be the way to do it." He added a few lines and a few more boxes. From what I could see, it meant that Harry would do all the interesting stuff and I'd sweep up afterwards.

"Looks to me as if you've cut the balls out of my area and put them over into Harry Winthrop's," I said.

"Ah, but your area is still very important, my dear. That's why I don't have you actually reporting to Harry." He gave me a smile like a lie.

He had put me in a tidy little bind. After all, he was my boss. If he was going to take most of my area away from me, as it seemed he was, there wasn't much I could do to stop him. And I would be better off if we both pretended that I hadn't experienced any loss of status. That way I kept my title and my salary.

"Oh, I see." I said. "Right."

It dawned on me that this whole thing had been decided already, and that Harry Winthrop probably knew all about it. He'd probably even wangled a raise out of it. Tom had called me in here to make it look casual, to make it look as though I had something to say about it. I'd been set up.

This made me mad. There was no question of quitting now. I'd stick around and fight. My eyes blurred, unfocused, refocused again. Compound eyes! The promise of the small comb in my hand was fulfilled! I felt a deep chemical understanding of the ecological system I was now a part of. I knew where I fit in. And I knew what I was going to do. It was inevitable now, hardwired in at the DNA level.

The strength of this conviction triggered another change in the chitin, and for the first time I could actually feel the rearrangement of my mouth and nose, a numb tickling like inhaling seltzer water. The stiletto receded and mandibles jutted forth, rather like Katharine Hepburn. Form and function achieved an orgasmic synchronicity. As my jaw pushed forward, mantis-like, it also opened, and I pounced on Tom and bit his head off.

He leaped from his desk and danced headless about the office.

I felt in complete control of myself as I watched him and continued the conversation. "About the Model 2000 launch," I said. "If we factor in the demand for pipeline throughput and adjust the media mix just a bit, I think we can present a very tasty little package to Product Marketing by the end of the week."

Tom continued to strut spasmodically, making vulgar copulative motions. Was I responsible for evoking these mantid reactions? I was unaware of a sexual component in our relationship.

I got up from the visitor's chair and sat behind his desk, thinking about what had just happened. It goes without saying that I was surprised at

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

my own actions. I mean, irritable is one thing, but biting people's heads off is quite another. But I have to admit that my second thought was, well, this certainly is a useful strategy, and should make a considerable difference in my ability to advance myself. Hell of a lot more productive than sucking people's blood.

Maybe there was something after all to Tom's talk about having the proper attitude.

And, of course, thinking of Tom, my third reaction was regret. He really had been a likeable guy, for the most part. But what's done is done, you know, and there's no use chewing on it after the fact.

I buzzed his assistant on the intercom. "Arthur," I said, "Mr. Samson and I have come to an evolutionary parting of the ways. Please have him re-engineered. And charge it to Personnel."

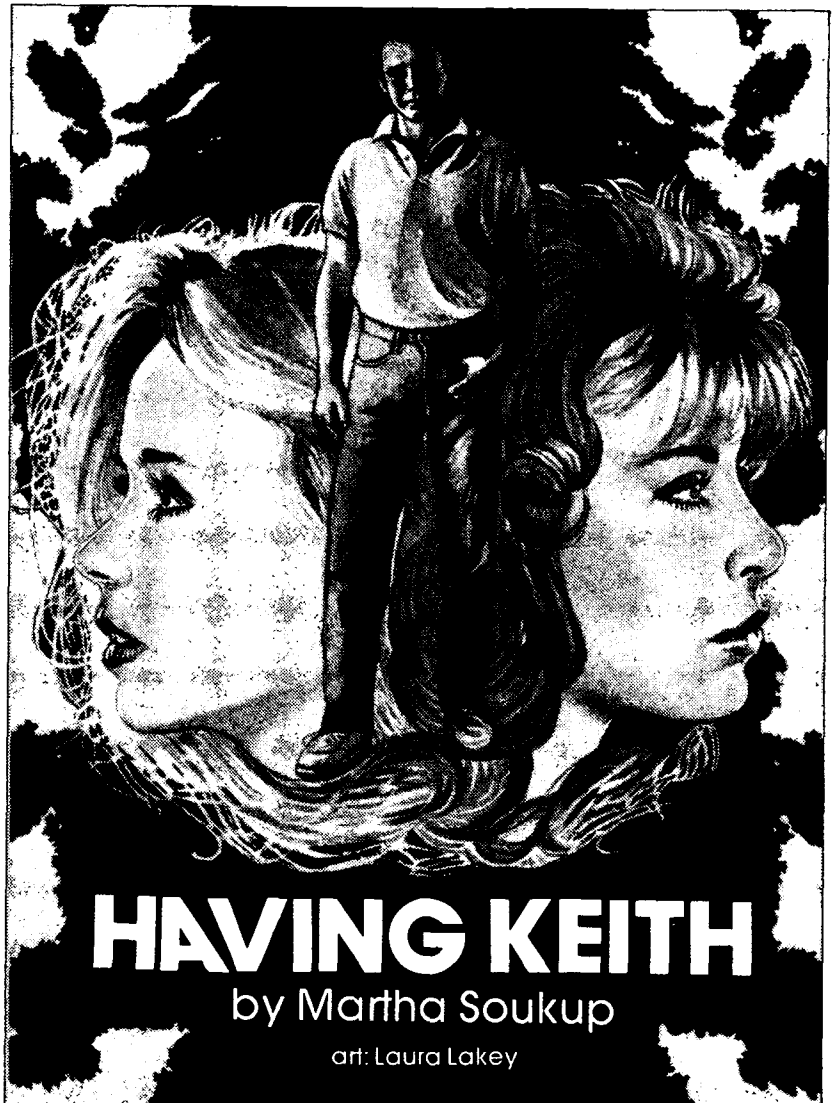
Now I feel an odd itching on my forearms and thighs. Notches on which I might fiddle a song? ●

NEXT ISSUE

Hot new writer **John Barnes** returns to these pages next month with our July cover story, "The Limit of Vision." Barnes takes us far into the future, to an embattled Terran outpost on a distant alien world, where the Terran colonists are embroiled in—and slowly losing—a deadly interspecies war. Only Brother Hauskyld a xenist of the Brothers of St. Mbwe, has a chance to unravel the strange and intricate biological mystery that fuels the conflict, and to do so, he must risk his life—and more. Don't miss this taut and thought-provoking novella of deadly social and culturial conflict on a distant world. Hugo and Nebula-winner **Connie Willis** is also on hand for July, and from deep space she takes us somewhat closer to home, to near-future Arizona, to investigate another mystery, this one a mystery of the hidden depths of the human heart, in the ingenious, bittersweet, and powerful story, "The Last of the Winnebagos."

ALSO IN JULY: Karen Joy Fowler, whose "The Faithful Companion at Forty" was one of our most popular stories last year, returns with the wry and moving tale of a woman who is not what she seems, and who encounters more strangeness than she bargained for, in "Lily Red"; July also sees three writers making their *IAsfm* debuts: new writer **Hillary Rettig** spins a deceptively-quiet tale about the interface of future shock and good intentions, in "Through Alien Eyes"; **Geoffrey A. Landis** gives us an unsettling look at an experiment that could determine the fate of the entire universe, in "Vacuum States"; and new writer **Dave Wolverton** treats us to a deadly cat-and-mouse game in which one kind of terrorist is pitted against another in a hostile alien environment, in "The Sky Is An Open Highway." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our July issue on sale on your newwstands on May 31, 1988.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



HAVING KEITH

by Martha Soukup

art: Laura Lakey

Martha Soukup is a 1985 graduate of the Clarion Writers' Workshop, and in a very short period of time, she has sold a number of stories to various science fiction magazines and anthologies. These sales include a first-prize story in *Writers of the Future*, Vol. 3."Having Keith" marks her first appearance in *IAsfm*.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She wants him, wants him; she knows she cannot have him and she wants him.

He always comes to the library on Tuesday afternoons, so Paula is there too. Sitting very straight in the carrel, she can just see him over the top of the partition. Look at the way his hair sweeps across his forehead in dark bangs; there, he turns to replace a book and she can see the curls move softly at the nape of his neck. Lord, he is beautiful! She remembers another glimpse of him, his sleek, tanned body. But that was not through her own eyes and she is not sure, just yet, that it was real.

He bends to pick another book from a low shelf, disappearing; she must hold herself down in her chair, not leap up; after all the holding back she must not make a fool of herself now. A breath, two breaths, three, and he reappears. Now she really breathes. Air in his absence gives no sustenance.

She will have him. It might be enough just to see him, breathe his air, feel his presence, but soon enough he is bound to find out how she feels, and he will block her out completely, deny her even that. So she will find another way. That glimpse of him as though through other eyes, something she has not experienced since she was three—

He does not want *her*. While she was falling unwillingly in love with him, he was falling enthusiastically in love with another.

She will find another way.

That sudden vision of Keith had been such a shock she could not sustain it. It was just his back, disappearing through a bathroom door; but it was unmistakably *him,* his long soft hair damp and tousled, and Paula had gasped in her bed while he melted away and was replaced by the speckled drapes of her tiny apartment.

She closes her eyes and thinks of Patty. Light brown hair and smiling light brown eyes, exactly like Paula but forever three years old. Patty and Paula were so close that they never thought it was strange they could see through each other's eyes, and they were so young adults never took anything they said about it seriously. Only years later did Paula learn that most people couldn't do anything like that.

The last thing she saw through her twin sister's eyes was the powder blue Dodge careening around the corner, straight at her. Little Paula screamed and fainted; when she woke up, she was a singleton.

It is a painful memory. But Patty is gone forever, and she learned long ago that it was no use thinking about her.

The vision of Keith is still with her, an image burned into her brain. Droplets of water glisten on his tanned and leanly muscled back; he is just turning his head around, perhaps to say something. A towel is tucked around his waist. He has very good legs.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It has been seventeen years since she has seen anything through another person's eyes. She wonders if she could again.

"What are you doing tonight?"

Chicken-fried steak turns to bile in Paula's mouth. She gulps it down. Take a breath: one, two.

"Studying, Elaine," she says carefully, and makes herself look up.

Elaine: slender, petite, very blond, deep long-lashed grey eyes. Carries herself with confidence, assurance. As well she should.

She used to think of Elaine as her best friend.

"Great," says Elaine, blind Elaine, with sweet sincerity. "Do you want me to come over and work through calculus together?"

"No," she says. Two phonemes. "Thanks." Another five. Seven phonemes: see how good she is at talking to Elaine.

"Well, if your place is no good tonight you could come over to mine," says Elaine with the beautiful density Paula has come to loathe. "If it's before his night class, Keith will be there, but we can get a larger pizza." Enthusiasm warms her voice.

"No!" How can she lose control of two phonemes? A breath. "Thanks. I have to go to the library."

"Why?"

My god, stop talking, stop making me talk! "Research."

"What are you researching?"

"A paper."

"What class?"

Stop it! "Psych 204."

"Isn't that the paper you said you had to finish last week when I asked you to the movie?"

She has been keeping Elaine's heart-shaped face out of focus; even that becomes too much, and she turns to her steak, sawing her knife through straw-colored bread crumbs. "Professor Bell asked me to expand it." Twenty or thirty or god knows how many phonemes, too many, please jesus Elaine stop!

Elaine stops. Paula takes a bite, chews mechanically and swallows. Another bite. Silence. Against her will she looks up to see the other woman staring angrily at her.

"Fine, Paula. I'm sure I don't know what it is with you anymore. I won't bother you again." She stalks off, picture of self-righteous indignation. Why shouldn't she be? Paula is not going to tell her either.

Those were *your* eyes I saw through, weren't they, dear cruel friend?

Attacking the chicken-fried steak.

I can do it.

* * *

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The day she met him is preserved as perfectly in her mind as a strip of film. She had noticed he was older than the rest of the class when he sat beside her in zoology; that was all the notice she intended to pay him. But something about him kept reminding her that he was at her elbow, and by the end of the class she decided to talk to him.

"Lunch?" How bold she felt!

"A meal consumed between breakfast and supper." He had a wonderful smile. "Are we getting pop quizzes already in this class?"

She laughed. "I know some places around here that beat the cafeteria. Are you interested?"

"Anything would. I like a woman who makes promises she can live up to."

She laughed again. "Elaine! Um—" She gestured.

"Keith."

"—Keith and I are going to hit Albert's. Want to come?"

Mistake! How she has replayed that sentence in her mind. If it is a film, it has white streaks and splice jumps and the soundtrack flutters.

"I should go to the bookstore—oh, heck, sure."

Elaine was safe. Although she and her boyfriend fought, everyone agreed they would never split up.

"Sounds fun," said Keith.

Over chili dogs at Albert's, she discovered he was beautiful.

He had just returned to college to prepare for med school, an ambition he shared with both Paula and Elaine. "Twelve-year-old B.A.'s in history don't exactly get you into Johns Hopkins." He had been trapped in his father's business for a decade; now the excitement of his new life lit up his eyes. "I always swore I'd never be a paper-pusher, but when I got married it all just seemed to happen. Now that that's over—don't laugh!—I'm plunging right into good old '60's idealism: inner-city clinics, helping starving babies and pregnant kids and all that counter-counterrevolutionary stuff." He shrugged with self-deprecation, while his eyes crinkled all round. Paula felt more excited about med school than she had been since she was a freshman.

The tan and the weathering were from rock climbing. His hands were quick, dextrous: jazz piano. His hair, unfashionably long. She was amused, intrigued; this Keith person would make a wonderful new fantasy. Of course, she was busy with her own life, wary of complications; she couldn't afford to get caught up with another person busy with his.

So she laughed when Elaine brought up amusing anecdotes about her confirmed bachelorhood and the last few guys who had tried to change her mind. She shouldn't let this guy think she was *interested.*

(And the only person she had ever been that close to was Patty, and Patty had died.)

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Somehow, would-be boyfriends led the conversation to his ex-wife.

"—finally she just left. Well, it made sense. When I wasn't working, I'd be climbing, or taking guitar lessons, or directing a community theater show—anything to keep from thinking about being trapped. She wasn't interested in any of those things. She wanted something else. After she left, I realized I did, too." He blinked and looked surprised at what he was saying.

"Do you miss her?" Elaine asked softly.

"I don't know. It wasn't like I knew her anymore." Elaine's small pale hand covered his. "Yes." She squeezed; he sighed, shook his head, smiled at her.

That was when Paula realized she loved him; and, simultaneously, that it was too late.

Not too late. Not too late!

She opens her eyes to see her hands clenched in front of her on the scarred veneer of the carrel. (Her lie to Elaine became self-fulfilling and she is back in the library, an empty place without Keith.) She tries to think about anything else, but it is no use. Whenever Keith invades her thoughts (which is most of the time), he comes flooding in everywhere at once. As, uninvited, does Elaine. "We're not actually *living* together," Elaine giggles in her mind, and at the same time Paula can see their apartments, his just down the hall—opening the door, seeing a closet full of clothes, a desk covered with papers—and no bed. No cot, no futon, not a goddamned sleeping bag. Why are they so damn coy?

No. —Keith chasing a frisbee (Elaine throwing it). Keith making a joke that breaks everyone at the table up (Elaine slapping his back). Keith staring somberly across the duck pond (Elaine sneaking up and prompting a smile).

No!

Channel the emotion. She breathes slowly and deeply, forcing herself to be calm. She counts, slowly, slowly; her breathing evens; she rests her head on her arms. Things begin to fade away, as she concentrates. Keith. *Her.* (And a distant echo of Patty.) She feels oddly bouyant as she drifts off. . . .

. . . He smiles at her. He reaches out and strokes her face. She wants to laugh, or cry, or learn to dance like in the movies so she can dance like that.

A voice in the back of her head says, This is impossible.

Shut up.

He's blind to everyone but Elaine.

Go away!

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It's not real.

I've *made* it real! and she grabs him and kisses him in a wonderful moist mess and when she pulls back finally her hair has fallen into a blond web over her eyes and she remembers how.

"Sweet Elaine," he says softly.

Not you, the voice says, and his beautiful face begins to fade.

Shut up, she thinks grimly. I'll *make* it me.

Blackness.

Despite a blinding headache, she makes it home from the library. She should be elated at the first success, but the memory of the kiss is staggering, almost more painful than pleasurable, as when she was twelve and first considered that it was actually possible to kiss someone, thinking of a boyishly charming television star. The first visceral imagination of what that would be like had literally knocked her breath away, frightening her.

Even Keith's touch on her cheek eclipes that memory.

Not *your* cheek, says the nagging voice.

In any case, she must find out if it was genuine, not some trance-induced dream. She forces herself to seek out Elaine's company the next afternoon in the cafeteria. Elaine has forgotten or forgiven Paula's rudeness of the day before; Paula endures a stream of one-sided conversation—a conversation in which she is determinedly silent.

"—funny thing is that he thinks he knows me so well, but he really doesn't."

If you loved him you wouldn't hide anything from him. *I* wouldn't.

"It's this whole love-at-first-sight thing. He did the same thing with his ex, you know. He didn't see that she wasn't what he thought until she left him, and he thinks I'm exactly the same image that came to him in one piece. Lucky it's a good one!"

I never fall in love at first sight. I always used to be safe from that.

"Anyway, I really think this will work out. I'll have to be careful, of course. His illusions are so precious to him. But he's got to stop that idiotic climbing. And this notion of staying friends with his ex is impossible, don't you agree? And the idea of starving with his patients in the ghetto! A lovely dream, but it makes a lot more sense if we take over my uncle's practice together. He'd get stubborn if I told him outright, but I'll get him to see reason."

Keep your fucking hands off him, you ungrateful scum! Paula bites the insides of her cheeks to keep her mouth shut and almost misses what Elaine is saying:

"Things I just couldn't tell him. Like—he thinks I'm so level-headed—but last night I just flaked out. We were studying and I *swear* I didn't have

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

anything in mind but all of a sudden all my clothes were off! He said he never saw me so aggressive. I don't even remember starting it! Just a blank. Scary. It's finals stress, I guess. You won't tell, will you?"

Paula stares at her. "This was last night?" Elaine nods. "About what time?"

"I don't know—nine or so—why?"

Bingo! "If it only happened once I wouldn't worry about it."

"You're probably right." Elaine looks relieved. "It's so nice to have someone I can tell something like that to."

You should trust him with things like that. You don't deserve him. The thought comes with a rush of warmth, a rightness. She thinks it again, clearly. You don't deserve him.

I deserve him.

She pushes her bedtime forward, spends each night meditating, trying to project herself onto Elaine again. The results are mixed: a glimpse of his face once, twice; Elaine's small hands washing in the sink; class notes; an oddly-angled view of his foot. No contact as sustained as the first, and in the mornings she is very tired, as though she had not slept. Still, she takes strength from the small successes.

One night she finds herself sitting on the edge of the sofabed. The scene is hazy, the contact unstable. She looks up and Keith is at the door. It starts to slip away. Quickly she jumps up, slams the door in his face, double-latches and chains it before she loses touch.

Awakening, exhausted, she can still see the astonishment on his face.

That morning Elaine is very pale.

Keith approaches her after zoology and everything clenches inside her. She has not spoken to him in class since, inevitably, he chose Elaine as his lab partner. "Has Elaine talked to you today?"

"No. Why?" Her hand remembers the feel of his neck, his hair.

"Nothing. She just was—a little strange, last night. It's not important." He smiles innocently at her; it hurts; at the same time she feels triumph. She is no longer powerless. The knowledge gives her confidence. She smiles back at him.

"Do you want to go out to lunch?"

"Well," he says, looking back where Elaine is cleaning up their table, "I'm not sure she's up for it now. I can ask her."

It is the longest conversation she has had alone with him. Every nerve is stretched, humming. "Do *you* want to go to lunch. I didn't ask her."

He frowns a little. "I can hardly leave her alone right now."

"It might be a good idea. Anyone who slams a door on you with no explanation—"

"I thought she hadn't talked to you."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

That's right. She is so fatigued; she forgot. She rushes over the lapse. "Maybe you should spend time with other people. You've spent so much with her, you can't know what other people might have to offer."

He is really looking at her now, straight at her. It dizzies her, looking in his eyes. "What are you saying?" he asks quietly.

Why not, she asks herself. What is there to lose, anyway? She opens her mouth, cannot speak.

"You?"

"Yes," she says in a tiny, odd voice. "If you could only look past her for once—if you just saw what I could—"

"I see." His voice is distant.

"I mean, look at her! Having blackouts, acting irrationally, trying to cover it up—"

"You'd really use this against her."

"You don't know her! She wants to change you, she wants to destroy you—"

"If Elaine needs help, I'm going to see that she gets it. And the first thing to do is protect her from her supposed friends. I think," he says, his eyes chilly, opaque, "it would be best if you don't see her anymore." He turns his back on her. He collects Elaine, who follows with uncharacteristic passivity, and walks out of the classroom without another word.

I don't want to see *her,* I want to see *you!* Oh lord, I blew it, I finally ruined it all. She slides down against the blackboard and cries silently in the empty classroom.

Again she walks home alone, always alone. There is thunder and then rain pours down on her. She seeks no shelter; let the storm crash against her. She passes their building and sees a light in Elaine's apartment. She stops to stare at it for a while, thinking irrelevantly that no one could know there are tears among the rainwater streaming down her face: although she has destroyed her own façade, the storm has kindly given it back to her. The wind plasters her shirt and jeans to her chilled skin. She stares until the pain tops over and runs out of her like rainwater, and walks on. Near her own building a bare-chested young man is washing his hair in the squall; he flicks suds at her and his friends laugh. "Hey, lady," they call. "Hey, lady!" She keeps walking, their laughter following her.

Her apartment repels her with its emptiness. All or nothing, she thinks. She opens the oven door and blows out the pilot light; she lifts the stove top and extinguishes that one too. She turns all the dials. She is quite calm, because she knows what will happen: she will fail to keep contact with Elaine, return to her own body and open the windows; or

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

she will stay until there is no body to return to. She has raised the stakes so that there can be no failure. It makes perfect sense.

The smell is appalling but she ignores it, closes her eyes, breathes slowly. Keith. If he can only see good in Elaine, who is bad for him, only feel disdain for *her* love, then she will *be* Elaine. The blackness behind her eyelids deepens.

Black forever.

It would be easy, but she does not forget to concentrate. This is not like anything she has ever attempted before.

Black.

There is an arm. It does not want to move: she makes it move. There is a leg. Slowly, grimly, she straightens it. There is Elaine. She refuses it. She will not allow it. Fear, pleading, a horrible tearing and it is—yes! Gone! —And there is pain, and vertigo, and redness, and black again.

The bed feels wrong. Everything feels wrong, as though she is starting a bad cold. Worse.

Finally she opens her eyes. At first she thinks there is something wrong with her vision too: the ceiling is too close, the wrong shade. She swings her legs to the floor and almost falls: her balance is skewed. She grips the headboard—sofa back—and pulls herself to her feet. It has finally gotten through her brain, which seems as sluggish as her body, that she has made it. This time she is here for good.

She takes a breath—it feels odd, insubstantial, in Elaine's narrow, confining ribcage—and goes to the bathroom, leaning a hand on the wall to keep from falling. Her coordination is that of a two-year-old. Elaine's face stares unreadably at her from the mirror. Her stomach lurches. *Elaine's* stomach lurches: the thought rises like bile.

The face is pasty, almost bloated; the grey eyes inhumanly pale. How can Keith find this attractive? She finds the makeup, yanks out the drawer, overcompensating for the weaker body, spilling trays and tubes of makeup. She gathers them clumsily in shaking hands.

She opens all the makeup and applies it furiously, trying to soften the big yellowish eyes with eyeshadow, smearing on blusher to narrow the cheeks—to look like Paula. She stares at the results: a dimestore china doll, sloppy, lifeless.

There is a knock on the door. Her heart (Elaine's heart, flabby in her chest) jumps. She calls out: "Just a second!" The voice is high-pitched in her ears. She cannot tell if it sounds natural.

A pause. "Are you okay?" asks Keith's voice.

She swallows. "Yes. I'll be right out."

She takes off the nightgown. The breasts are small but too heavy, too

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

low. The waist is too narrow and the thighs are heavy and the ankles are *puffy*. Where is the little scar above the navel (never such a deep and puckered hole)? The pallid skin smothers her. The room darkens and she realizes she is hyperventilating; she grabs for the toilet tank with short white arms. The icy porcelain is friendlier than Elaine's clammy, alien flesh.

Keith's voice is calling a name that is not hers. A key scrapes in the lock.

"Elaine? Honey?" Muscular arms circle the narrow naked waist and she shudders, squeezes the eyes tight. She feels how small the mouth is as it tightens into a rictus, and shakes harder. She is turned around. "What have you done to your face?" His hand strokes the cheek. In all her fantasies his hand on her face felt like his hand on *her* face. He half-carries her to the sofa, a warm, firm forearm supporting the heavy breasts. He squeezes and she feels Elaine's nipples respond, harden, with a life of their own. She jerks away, lurching to her feet.

"Elaine?" Through Elaine's eyes he is distorted, Picasso by way of El Greco. He reaches for her but she evades him somehow and is in the bathroom, throwing the bolt.

But in the bathroom is the mirror, the monster staring at her. The banging on the door, the shouts of an alien name, sound very far away. A can of shaving cream sits on the sinktop, and not having to think about it she grabs it, smashes it into the mirror.

"Elaine!"

One long shard of glass nestles in the spreading foam. She picks it up slowly. She thinks of Patty, whom she will finally join. And she thinks: Keith, you beautiful idiot. There is a faint smell of gas.

She wakes up. Wakes up? Then she has had the worst nightmare of her life, and is cured forever of a sordid fantasy.

Her limbs feel long again, too long after the impossible confinement of that little body—her own body feels foreign after the ordeal. She waits for normalcy.

But who is she holding? Who is so cold?

She opens her eyes, and is met by Elaine's smiling empty stare.

Her arms around Elaine are tanned and muscular; dark bangs sweep across her vision.

And so she is successful.

She has Keith. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

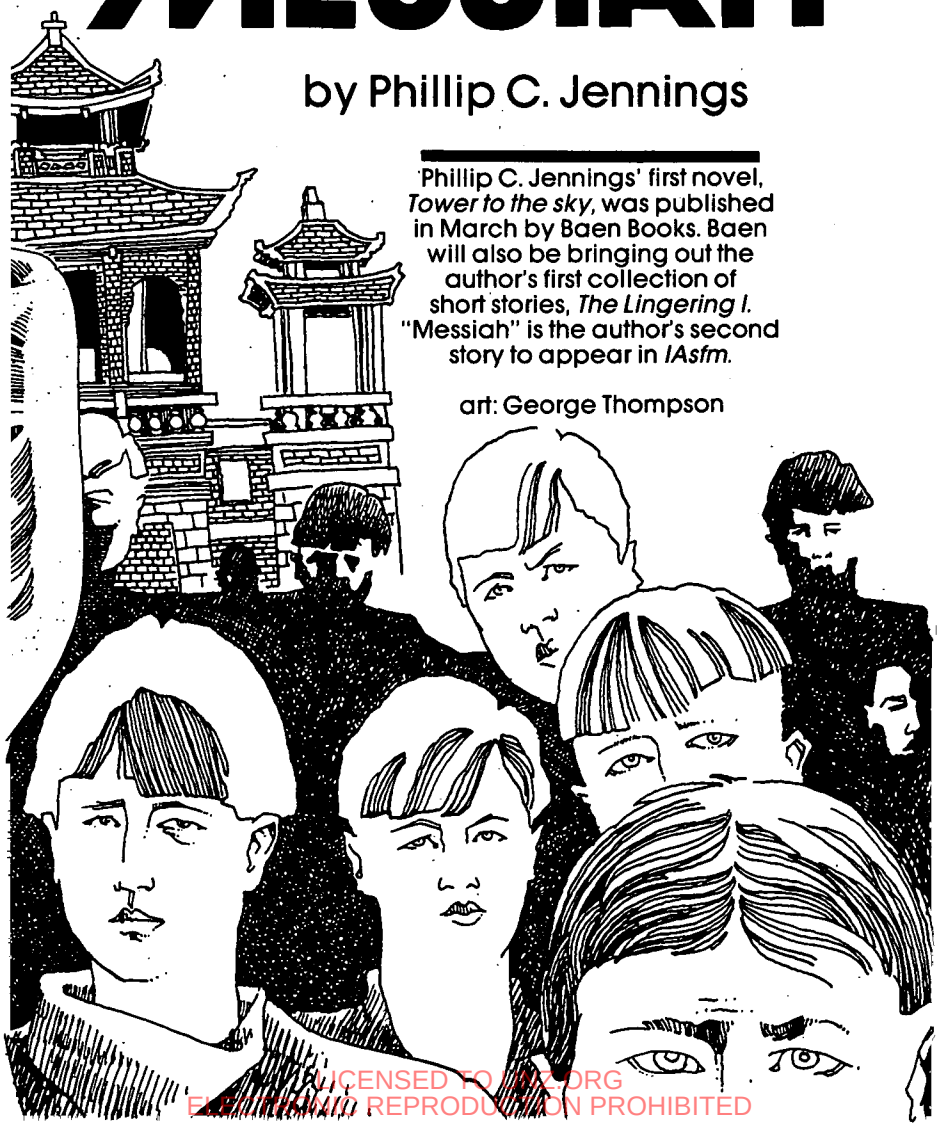
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MESSIAH

by Phillip C. Jennings

Phillip C. Jennings' first novel, *Tower to the sky*, was published in March by Baen Books. Baen will also be bringing out the author's first collection of short stories, *The Lingering I*. "Messiah" is the author's second story to appear in *IAsfm*.

art: George Thompson



LICENSED TO ISFDB.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A rustle, and the scratch of a pen. "Comrade Zhang Jok—can that be right? *Jok?*"

The student labworker stepped over the doorsill. "My mother's family came from Shanghai. Her grandfather was comprador to a foreign patron."

"A strange name, however Sinocized. Individualistic, but 2021 was a time of deviation, so soon after imperialist powers carved up Russia. A misfortune to be born then. As you grew you were infected. Now you ask to be exempted from the lottery. Very well to ask *before* your name is chosen, but this is *after*."

The cadre's shoot-from-the-hip judgments were often harsh, and blighted the careers of those who came to him, but Jok had no future, not as things stood. "One chance in two hundred of being selected," the tall young man answered. "To sue for exemption would have meant much trouble."

"Trouble? But now it's too late. Comrade Zhang, our commune is forever meeting quota, and our quota for the lottery is four hundred thirty bodies. If we consider your petition . . ." The cadre looked up from the documents on his table, out the window into the narrow street. "If we consider your petition we'll shortly be faced with four hundred twenty-nine others."

Comrade Zhang rubbed his scalp in agitation. "Four hundred thirty good Chinese bodies sold to the foreign ghosts!"

"Millions of Chinese bodies, to improve our trade balance and reduce our population. And we notice when foreigners take our flesh they develop interest in our culture, and look with favor on our government." The cadre stood. "Four hundred thirty hungry mouths. Or is your work of special importance?"

"Special" could translate to "individual." Connotations of arrogance, elitism . . . "I defer to my learned superior, who asked me to bring this note. We do secret work. The foreign imperialists may contrive to ask about it when I'm transported across the Eastern Ocean."

"Scientific work?" The cadre looked up from his documents.

"On the rootworm problem in Uganda—"

"Bah! Wiser to keep your mouth shut, to imply matters of consequence! Hegemony vassals victimized by their own half-baked genetic experiments. How is it Spring Blossom Commune has a finger in this imperialist pie?"

"We have Professor Shwe from the University of Kunming," Jok answered.

The cadre's glasses slid down his nose, and gave his skeptical squint a comic air. "More strange names. A southerner, nor Han. Overeducated and floating among the clouds. Such people visit for reeducation, not to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

infect us with their crazy ideas. Professor Shwe's plea counts nothing. I do you the favor of not forwarding this petition, and spare much embarrassment to your respected father."

Weeks later Comrade Zhang and several thousand others stepped from the hard-seat cars of their emigrant train to march down the bluffs to a shore not presently in sight, so effectively was this hilly landscape chopped by concrete towerblocks, gnarled willows, hedges, and fenced roads.

Nevertheless the layered verticals of a densely populated land thinned, hinting at openness beyond. The last walls gave way to mooring posts. Box lunches were stacked beyond: rice, though Jok preferred noodles or dumplings.

As he ate Jok looked over a wide vista, for no ships harbored at this embarking point to block his view. Ocean lay south of a promontory that concealed most of the M.S. *New Happiness*, a sad sunrise ocean whose special time was spent, its waste horizon dissolved in mist. The sea resisted the sun's afternoon yellows and held to white-crested gray, cold waves that chilled the air.

A woman collected Jok's box. Minutes in transit, the ship's launch finally pulled in. Its engine burbled contentedly while a multitude clamored aboard. As they motored into the bay the air grew frigid, smelling briskly of salt and seaweed.

The launch went back and forth, carrying quilted thousands aboard the *New Happiness*. Here some chattered in distressed excitement, but most stood shivering. Lacking any right to complain, they yet felt inexpressibly wronged. Chairwoman Lao spoke of immortality. To doubt her was to blaspheme the Party, but still . . .

Jok sighed hopelessly and his sigh ran through the crowd. The launch returned from its last journey. The ship's intercom squealed: barking into a roughly handled microphone, the officer of the day recited the emergency drill. Bulkheads opened and passengers of the *New Happiness* filed inside for the assignment of wardrooms and hammocks.

Engine noise. The enormous ship was under way. A chime rang and in the wardrooms belowdecks the lecture began.

"Foreign devils grow old and sick from their debaucheries," the intercom told them. "They discard decrepit bodies for new ones in conformity with complicated rules of merit" (here a few heads nodded), "or by paying an immense shortcut fee."

A moment of silence while Jok and his neighbors gasped at such blatant corruption.

"—They'll buy your bodies," the voice continued, "and China will benefit. Your families will be honored. Do not fear that pain is involved. The

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

imperialists merely put your heads in a helmet, and copy your memories and dispositions into a small box where they'll be preserved. The China of a great future will redeem you and return your spirits to new bodies. Yours is the benefit of sitting on the shelf while others build that new China, so you may even call yourselves lucky!

"You know the promises of Chairwoman Lao, which should be complete comfort to you, but in addition I tell you this: the foreign imperialists trust those same boxes to contain *their* souls during transit from one body to another. What they do out of greed, you may certainly do motivated by sacrifice and patriotism!"

"Amen," someone muttered not far from Jok's ear. A shocking comment, a word from religion sardonically misapplied. A person who put himself against the people—Jok forced his head to turn, but none of his fellow passengers looked branded by evil.

A click and fumble. The intercom spoke now with the voice of a man who knew nothing about speaking to the masses. No oratorical harshness—as if he chatted intimately one-to-one.

"Greetings. The Security Hegemony of United Earth welcomes you to its seas and affords safe passage to your North American destination. Whatever purpose you have in making this voyage, we are grateful, because through you peace is preserved. The body traffickers who earlier this century brought misery to the Third World are out of business, unable to compete in a market dominated by your numbers. While talk of markets may be foreign to your thinking, it's your right to learn as much as you want about us during your short sojourn on our shores.

"And speaking of rights . . ."

The Old Cowboy paused, an oratorical trick he'd learned two lifetimes ago, now applied to Mandarin Chinese. "—Well, there's a Second Bill of Rights that applies to you while your souls are shelved. This Bill allows you to be turned on one day every year, and gives you access to newsrolls, H-V, and other sources of information. It allows you to endow yourself with a modest estate. It allows you to make investment decisions about that estate, and accumulate wealth. It also allows you to apply for jobs, and to be turned on for the duration of your work, and given appropriate mobility.

"Well, that completes the roster. I don't mean to take up any more of your time. But as a citizen of that special part of the Hegemony, I want to say *welcome to California*!"

A premature welcome. Zhang Jok spent his next days queuing for food, queuing for daily hours on deck, and queuing for his minute in the shower. In all this he let himself be mesmerized by sea and sky, the thought of life's approaching end—and boredom. Boredom made precious hours long. Sea time was dreamtime, until so many days passed the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

scales tipped and only the ship seemed real. Memories of land grew jumbled, and petty as the whines of Jok's wardroom mates, who quarreled about dice and misplaced shoes.

The *New Happiness* crossed Eastern Ocean to the Beautiful Kingdom, and passed through Golden Gate. Jok woke from one reality into another, far less transcendent.

The launch conveyed his crowd to an island. As they debarked each was handed an information packet. Foreign ghosts looked at the numbers on these packets and guided them to various cellblocks and cells.

Across the water from cellblock "E" rose a fantasy city; towers and hills, parks and pastels. Sadly Jok saw nothing fantastic about his room, just a bed like in his Spring Blossom dormitory: though on *this* bed lay toiletries, clean underclothes, and socks.

Jok's packet included this week's H-V schedule, printed on paper of unfamiliar glossiness. A card told him he was scheduled for photos tomorrow at 16:15, and a letter required him to present himself for a physical Thursday beginning at 5:00 and lasting all day.

"Then surgery." Jok's upper bunkmate winked down at him. "No little China-babies. They open your love-weapon and snip the tubes, then sew the old friend up again. No babies, only fun."

Jok's jaw hung slack. He looked at the others for confirmation. Number Three nodded glumly. "It's not my body anymore. Let them waste *ch'i* in fruitless fornication!" He waved a sheet of paper. "A law of the Hegemony; replacement bodies can't be fertile."

"Or they'd soon have too many people." Jok nodded. "I understand." He considered mentioning his upcoming operation in the letter he began writing to Professor Shwe.

A letter he might never mail. What if Hegemonist lackeys intercepted it and tricked out secrets? What if the Party meant to keep news of mass sterilization from the Chinese people?

Then, too, what would mail from a foreign land do to Professor Shwe's fragile reputation?

The letter would have to be a masterpiece of discretion and piety. Jok wrote, curious if he was capable of these virtues. *"Dear Doctor Shwe: I salute you in confidence of the great Chairwoman's promises to us, that we will be redeemed and returned to China, where it is my first desire to serve the people by helping you . . ."*

A mere shadow of a sliver of hope! Perhaps Professor Shwe would be restored to his directorship and honors, and remember the tall student who translated botany articles for him in his bitter days of exile. Perhaps he'd insist Jok be brought back to him as expeditiously as possible. If Jok's letter flew quickly, and these Hegemonians were slipshod with their schedules—

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But they were anything but slipshod. The photographer was jocular, his female assistants teased the men into peacock poses: "Fine, fine! You should be a model! Aw, straighten those shoulders, show us how tall you are!"

"The pictures go out in catalogs," Number Three whispered. "Diseased old devils page through to bid on our bodies. That's why they want us to look our best."

Chinese in appearance, these picture-people acted like foreigners; uncouth and invasive. The doctors were more civil. They never made eye contact, but rumbled in their own language as they probed, in dialog with Jok's arms or chest, scrotum or arse. Thursday passed, and Jok was given a ninety-three rating, eight points above average.

Then came the operation and the long wait, three days exploring the channels of the room's H-V set. On the fourth morning Hegemonist lackeys came to Jok's cellblock and called a dozen names, no sign given this was anything but a post-surgical inspection.

Until hours passed and the lackeys came back to summon another dozen. Jok led the list. Perhaps it was best this way, better than lingering in an emptying room, waiting and wondering.

He was escorted through various halls, a dogleg ascent to surgery. Strength drained from his arms and legs as he let himself be strapped to a gurney. His eyes filled with tears. A nurse secured a helmet to his head. That was the last Comrade Zhang Jok remembered of his former life.

His *second* life Jok spent as a traffic signal, pleased to have outdoor work. It was the first job for which he'd been accepted—he might have held out for a factory slot and better pay, but with the numbers of dead rocketing upward, competition was fierce. In any case the downtrodden working classes of the Hegemony sometimes managed sabotage against "scab bugs."

Or was that true anymore? Times were changing. The 2050s saw a trend toward depopulation, something Jok quantified in terms of the cars that went through his intersection. There were times of day when he had leisure to enjoy his high suspended view; and during the 60s intervals of work cut ever more briefly into his musings.

His earnings were a pittance, but he saved enough to subscribe to a data network. Professor Shwe got him interested in agricultural genetics; he made this his area of study.

It didn't puzzle Jok that Professor Shwe's name never came up in the literature, nor his proposals for induced giganticism in the Sarracenia. A wall of policy stood between Shwe and Jok's present sources. Nevertheless it was frustrating to review the news from Africa. Western sci-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

entists kept blindly hammering in unproductive directions: kill, kill, kill; when with reconsideration of just one premise . . .

The need to beat back Dowling's rootworm meant genetics was an *applied* science here on Earth. Theoretical work came authored by *bugs*, the microship bugs of space, basking in solar energy; and especially the bugs of juice-rich Mercury, boxed souls whose thoughts seemed to move so very fast . . . could Jok be deteriorating? Humidity and oxidation, salt and exhaust gases and spider eggs . . . ?

Comrade Zhang Jok dropped his expensive subscription as he felt himself grow senile. Again his salary piled up. In 2083 he bought the latest product of the factories of Mercury; a cyberphotonic type H Jewelbody with cascade multiprocessors, filtered data channels, everything.

Instant genius, a prospective life-span of 5,000 years, field-tested in the hot acids of Venus and the frigid hail of Saturn's Rings, proof against solar storms and E-M pulses! Better healthy than rich. Now Jok was ridiculously healthy, and totally broke.

Three years later the powers-that-be decided there was no longer enough traffic at Jok's corner to justify his job. A glittering crystal the size of an H-V cassette, his type H Jewelbody was extracted from its old semaphore sheath and put in a columbarium, to be paged out for all but one day per year. No time to think, barely time to keep up superficial knowledge of all that was happening in ecology and genetics.

To Jok's subjective mind two weeks flicked by. Next day began the twenty-second century. Factories on Earth were closing, unable to compete with Mercury, Luna, and the asteroids. There were no proletarians left to suffer, only bugs were out of work, nothing to do but emigrate. Jok pondered a move to space, but he remembered China's dreams of greatness, and Professor Shwe. Wonderful doors waited to be opened, doors the faddish humans of the Hegemony knew nothing about because in their overfed frivolity they no longer bothered with science. The West was in decay, but what about China?

Was Shwe still alive in another body? Jok admitted it didn't seem probable. All his attempts to contact him had failed. What if the great man died in disgrace, his work unfinished?

One strong hope. Chairwoman Lao had promised to bring Jok back to China, and give him a new habitus. When her successors fulfilled her pledge Jok had a duty to perform, a duty he looked to eagerly. He would study until he could take bug experiments and translate them into reality.

And he'd be the first to do so, because the bugs of space had no interest in the practical applications of the work they'd done.

Comrade Zhang Jok waited on his shelf for the call to come. Years

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

went by. In 2145 the Bill of Rights for the Dead was repealed. There was no warning: He was switched off and never woke again.

"Your Illustrious Worship."

"Rise in rectitude, young Hashbaz Troffit. We have a second mission for you."

The Prophet stood on the dais, white-robed before his chair—a great dais, and a worthy throne, but all this clerestoried hall would soon be least of many special-purpose chambers. Even now the cries and hammerings of nearby workers made conversation inconvenient, and so the Prophet gestured Hashbaz close.

"A mission to Queen Mama? Back to the 'Mbo?"

"Would you like that?" The Prophet looked surprised. "The 'Mbo can be insufferable in their blindness."

"Yet they let us build our holy city where the Penultimate Prophets revealed the Seven Truths. A force for Good labors among them in their heathen darkness—"

"A force named greed." The Secular Monitor strode near, spurs jangling. He lowered his voice. "They're convinced that by ceding acreage for a holy city in a land once ours, they'll grow rich milking Cajamoor pilgrims from the coast."

Shaven heads bent together. The Prophet reached to grasp two shoulders, and looked from face to face. "That's why we don't want to find *too* many pilgrimage sites on the route from Calforna to the Missip River. I say this: friend Hashbaz, I discourage credulity. There are scores—*hundreds* of prospective shrines, but some express the bright genius of the land's *panhe*, others signify malignancy and evil. To declare a place holy is to make it separate, but which way? At some of these spots we shall gather to celebrate, others must be quarantined and cordoned off."

"And my mission?" Hashbaz inquired.

The Prophet gestured. A deacon jogged forward with his dispatch folder, satin covers multiple-sealed. To bow, tear the seals, and extend a folded page was all the work of a moment, but gracefully done not to seem hurried. The Prophet passed the paper on to Hashbaz. "I trust you to investigate sites on this list, in a borderland known as Texus, and report on their quality. And Hashbaz . . ."

"Yes, Your Worship?"

The Prophet bent close. "The Heegens would foment discord between 'Mbos and Cajamoors. These sites were suggested by Queen Mama. It would never do to belittle Her Majesty's judgment. Your investigations must be *very* thorough! Your facts must be solid, and your conclusions follow directly, so no 'Mbo courtier may whisper mischiefs against our

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cause. We are a minority here. Our hosts regard us as a twice-conquered race, first in Deseret and next in Cajan-Missura . . . despite our final triumph in Calforna a truculent faction hopes to test our strength."

"A contest for which we are far from ready, Calforna being so distant," the Secular Monitor observed.

"A contest for which we have no desire," the Prophet amended. "Well then, Hashbaz. A report on each site. On the difficult ones a series of reports, to stall while giving the appearance of weighty deliberation."

"I could spend my life on this," Hashbaz spoke in dismay. "The Heegens, from the old days of the Hegemony . . . In their Sodoms and Gomorrahs they have histories of these places. We make ourselves hostages. Take this 'House of Souls.' If we declare it a place of virtue, and they come up with some forgotten besmirching scandal—"

"We trust also in prayer, that you make no mistakes. Amen."

"Amen," repeated the Secular Monitor.

Hashbaz stared at the list. Remembering himself, he looked up and gulped. "Amen."

The House of Souls was square and rose from an earthen pyramid, four ranks of steps cutting upward through terraces handsome with trees and flowering shrubs.

Hashbaz and Devineau drew rein at its base. The town around them retained the ancient Anglo pattern of wide streets and separate houses, set in their own lots, of which this place was an extravagant example, taking up the entire large block.

"Green," Hashbaz muttered. "*Vert.* I expected Texus to be drier."

"You know your history," his 'Mbo guide responded. "It's wetter now than in antiquity. The Heegens might tell you why."

Hashbaz liked the black man's humor. They both smiled to think that Heegens could tell them anything. The heirs of the Hegemony neglected science, the understanding of which demanded discipline, er, *specialization.* No, the Heegens of 2507 were *renaissance thinkers* and *generalists*, a pose they failed to carry off beyond their Pale. West of the Algenny Mountains they were dismissed as foppish fools.

And almost all the world was west of the Algennies. "This is their zoo, did you know?" Hashbaz asked. "The land gone back to nature. We are zoo animals, and zoo cultures."

"C'est merveilleux," Devineau responded. "When the Rastrians invaded New Ingland, what was that? Zoo animals on the loose?" He shook his great head, for like most 'Mbos Devineau was large, his awesome muscularity rounded by fat. "Their pretensions would be insufferable were they not absurd."

Devineau eased off his stallion, a relief to the beast, stout though he

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was. Hashbaz followed suit. "My legs," he began. "If we can shake this dust off and wash, maybe by then I'll be ready for those stairs."

"Oh, no. This is a poor town, the *buckras* have no means for hospitality outside the House of Souls; no inns, only dens of vice. Where else would gentlemen lodge?"

"And Texus whites don't mind the rule of black Queen Mama?"

Devineau shrugged. "Who in her absence? The Esreti? We are the lesser evil, and our regime promises to make them rich. The House of Souls will draw pilgrims—"

"If it has good *panhe*. The exterior is daunting. Aggressively boxlike, a door like a mouth and windows like eyes, eyebrow ledges—the builder must have thought them decorative. But the solidity, like a fortress . . ."

"A glass fortress? You are not deceived by the glint of crystal. Translucence, yes, but this is no place of gossamer—it's constructed of the most durable bricks ever known to humankind."

Hashbaz mused. "What colossal arrogance to use dead souls as building material! Ghosts and hauntings! How could the owner have lived comfortably inside?"

They started up the steps, and reached the first terrace. Hashbaz was gratified to see Devineau breathe hard from the climb, not ready to answer his question, not until the housekeeper saw them from above and launched down to greet them.

"Comfortable?" the black man gasped. "He cared nothing for souls. They say he belonged to the Old Cowboy's gang."

The housekeeper arrived, and the three ascended to the next-inner terrace. "He was no politician," their new guide corrected. "Just a rich man named Mister Roberant, crass as he was wealthy. The townspeople hated him as they hated all Hegemonians—or so the story runs."

He turned and led them up a further height. "We and the Heegens are two peoples only because our rich retreated during the Troubles, and of course those who were abandoned felt resentment. But Roberant was a fool not to flee with them, he thought money could solve every problem."

"Ah."

"He also kept pantrogs. Pantrog slaves," the housekeeper continued, not even slightly out of breath.

Hashbaz kept windlessly noncommittal until they stood before the door. "Pantrogs?" he puffed.

The housekeeper swung the portal open, and bowed welcome. "Bred to obey. A travesty, intelligence without independence; half-apes, and strong. So the people of the town got together, and by sunset the decision was made. They surrounded the House of Souls and shot Roberant's pantrogs as they charged out. Roberant pled over phone and radio, but the authorities he sought were fled into the Pale. Soon it was over."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Hashbaz raised his hands, closed his eyes, and muttered a sensitizing prayer. He stepped across the threshold into a room with benches, coat-tree, and staircase. The housekeeper moved ahead of him to direct the guests into the Great Hall.

After moments of silence Hashbaz smiled to signify his spiritual antennae were withdrawn. He followed in. "There are legends of ghosts—" the housekeeper began.

"Of course." Hashbaz looked around. "It even looks boxy on the *inside*."

"A high ceiling in a room less large than proportion might demand." This was Devineau's assessment.

Hashbaz turned to the housekeeper. "You know I'm here to determine if this place is good or evil?"

"I do."

"Then you're a fool to tell me of murders. A fool, or an honest man. Your people will prosper if I decide one way, yet you persuade me the other?"

The housekeeper drew himself up. "You'd find out anyhow. Talk to the townsfolk and you'd hear the true evils of this House of Souls, mixed in with legends. Gory legends, to make matters worse than they are. With this mansion for inspiration one of our local arts is the spinning of ghost stories."

"The town entertains a small stream of vulgar tourists," Devineau contributed. "They come to be shown a place of horrors. But now I tell you how Queen Mama thinks. Each brick in these walls is a soul. The cumulative virtue of this house is determined by the virtue of so many souls, from which you must deduct the evils perpetrated by Mister Roberant and those who slaughtered his household."

"Ah." Hashbaz walked around the room, his gaze drawn up by in-streaming luminosity, brighter toward the heights. Jewel-stuff? He could almost see how this milky light was compounded of rainbow scintillas, atomies of flashing color. "—But how can these souls be virtuous? They sought to escape death, someday to find life in new bodies. All this is against God's plan."

"Many had no choice," the black man answered. "The poor were taken from their bodies to give the rich two lives. How can we judge without knowing?"

Hashbaz shook his head. "To know . . . to dream all these souls we need equipment. We'll go to the Heegens and ask for helmets. Then we have to extract each brick—"

The housekeeper blanched. "Destroy the House? *Then* where would we be? Ludicrous! You have no right—"

Devineau put up his hands. "Stop this noise." Simple words, affirming forever the superiority of 'Mbo courtier over local guide.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He turned. "You misunderstand, Hashbaz. These aren't dream memory cassettes, they're a different storage medium. You can't dream these souls; they didn't even *know* about dream protocols back when they were recorded. You can only bring them to life."

"We still need equipment, and bodies, too," Hashbaz answered, venturing to extremes like a good diplomat, the better to compromise in the end. "Lord knows how many bodies!"

"Just one body," the housekeeper insisted. "One soul. One to stand for all, chosen after careful prayer. Is that not the way to do it? The town senate would forbid anything more drastic, but certainly we can spare a single brick."

—and so the House of Souls inquiry is shelved pending the arrival of memory equipment from the Pale. I move on to the next site, gratified to discover how easily progress is delayed and decisions avoided. But Your Worship understands it seems best that we negotiate with the Heegens for such equipment, and bring this soul to life within our new city, all without 'Mbo participation, so my randomly chosen brick can prove uncoached to be Good or Evil. And though I find the thing useful as a paperweight when Texus winds gust through my tent, I forward it with this brief letter.

I presume the Heegens will be slow to deliver. It's my ambition to be slower; Your Worship obliged to assign someone else to the House of Souls affair. But if poor Hashbaz must see it through I can be at your side in six months with a preliminary assessment of the shrines of Texus.

And acknowledging I am sometimes regrettably impertinent when sharpened by the rigors of travel, I never forget I am also

Your obedient servant,
Hashbaz Troffit

Six months later Comrade Zhang Jok rose from his altar-bed. He looked at himself; big hands, hairy-devil forearms. "I'm white!" he giggled. "Barbarian name, barbarian body!"

"Do you speak Inglish?" Hashbaz asked from the foot of the room.

"If you listen very carefully, you'll discover I *am* speaking English," Jok answered. Something of barbarian deviltry seemed worked into his personality, for he continued: "After forty years learning I speak better than you."

Hashbaz blushed. "I'm told you'll adjust to your body very quickly, and should move and kick before trying to stand." Reminded of his source of information Hashbaz looked over his shoulder. Behind him a pair of deacons nodded, and escorted the Heegen memory technician from the room.

Jok complied, and exercised. The room fell silent and the silence grew

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

nervously long. "So now what?" Jok spoke, looking at a row of solemn faces. "Do you expect something from me?"

"It's our job to watch over you, and see to your needs."

"And what's *my* job?" Suspicion clouded Jok's face. "This isn't 2146, is it?" A question without a question's lilt, the answer was obvious in the design of the room and the clothing of Jok's attendants. "What year is it?"

"2507. Your last memories are from 2146?"

" '45," Jok spoke. "I'm going to walk now." He slid from the gurney and moved drunkenly. "Shouldn't you be giving me some orientation?"

"As you command," Hashbaz responded. "You ask what your job is, as if it's for us to say. But I tell you it's up to *you* to decide your work. Whatever you want to do, we'll make facilities available."

Jok blinked. "You're here to, uh . . . I don't understand. Are you my servants?"

Give him rope to hang himself. "We serve the greatest good by serving you," Hashbaz answered.

"There's something you're not telling me." Jok's eyes moved right to left. "Can we leave this room?"

The watchers parted. Jok toddled toward the doors and swung them open. "Bizarre," he muttered, looking into the Great Audience Hall. Choirs, monitors, delegations . . . He turned around. "The gift I hold in my brain may be for you, or not. My first job is to see to my own people. China must still exist; I must learn if you are enemies or friends. I beg forgiveness, but I am wary; my secrets are valuable."

"You want to go to China?" Hashbaz asked. "All the way across the seas?" He stared in dismay. His brick was blossoming into something more demanding than the average man. Hashbaz had prayed for an unambiguous sign the House of Souls was good or evil, and it looked like his prayer was answered—a soul who spoke of gifts and secrets was likely to make some mark on the world.

At that moment Hashbaz grew convinced. In his heart he wanted to believe that sometimes prayers *were* answered. This man was holy, whether angel or devil. He bowed low, no longer resenting his mission. "Would you be good enough to tell us your name?"

Months on horseback taught Jok to behave as a true lordling; impossible to be surrounded by servility without quickly coming to expect it.

The troop descended the Berdino Hills and wound into a region of small dried-out farms; some recent difficulty with irrigation, perhaps. Jok waved and Hashbaz rode up. "You telephoned? No difficulty about the books?"

"Always *some* difficulty. Getting an exemption from the ban on impious

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

communications, then finding the right equipment and rat-nesting it all together. Ink too dry to squirt, sunspot interference . . . yet the job is done. All on the docks, and no problem booking space on a westbound ship."

Jok looked at the arid landscape. "A hundred kilometers north of here I spent decades swinging in the wind."

"They were ignorant, not illumined by prophecy," Hashbaz answered. "Lift your spirits, these are better days."

"Better?" Jok spluttered. "Does this look like utopia?" He sank into himself. "Telephones and radio, but nothing new. There, that's the key. Nothing *new*-made, and nothing new *well*-made." He looked across the trail, answering Hashbaz's watchful gaze. "If I'm allowed to help you must recognize your problems. Although . . . excuse me, my thoughts are rambling. Hashbaz, what *are* your problems? Hunger, disease? Tell me what your Cajamoors regret."

"That we are not strong enough to quell the Esreti, or take Cajan-Missura from the 'Mbo. That we are not virtuous enough to give bodies to all the boxed souls in the House of Souls, nor prove the power of prophecy by our witness. That we are not rich enough to buy fusion generators to make us richer. That we are not wise enough to plan for the day when the rootworm peril will cross to this hemisphere—"

"The rootworm peril? What do you mean? We had rootworms in my time, in Africa; a genetic experiment to restore the jungle habitat, only it worked too well." Jok listened to his own words and shuddered. He drew rein. "It's been spreading ever since?"

Hashbaz stared back. "You are truly from another time."

"Has the jungle spread to China? Tell me!"

"We know the land you mean, we call it the Khanate. Your people are the Leninim, Chinese mostly, all Asia pressed in among them except those who came across. Many have come across, and some accepted *panhe*, but those who didn't soured the welcome for the rest by adhering to atheism and conquering Deseret. Now we know them as the Esreti, whom everyone hates. So if ships carry your people away from rootworm jungle, they carry them somewhere else than here."

"And in fact they may have no escape."

Hashbaz frowned thoughtfully. "The Kwi of the ships will know these things. When we pitch tents among them we'll ask to talk, and perhaps they'll invite us down."

The docks were alive, but not in the Chinese sense of queuing throngs. In California each clot of humanity was its own center, with documents, gear and spokesperson, each seeking to mesh with someone aboard the ship, each with its last-minute emergency. Jok's party rendezvoused with the man with the books and were introduced to a Kwi ticket

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

agent—everything went well except now they had eight horses, and no one to stable them on.

"No horses at sea," the Kwi declared. Jok shrugged; it was Hashbaz's problem, not his. Almost he was unkind enough not to wait, for the ship made him curious.

Two long, submerged tubes, bigger than the largest submarines of his time. From both rose narrowing hulls, devised to slice water like knives, then widening above the waves. These parallel hulls were paired outriggers, a deck stretched between them, a vast square field of metal, little piles of trade-goods lying like scattered shanty-towns.

Hashbaz finished with the horses. Kwi porters took the party's goods and they spiraled up the stairs to boarding level, and across. Hashbaz inspected his tickets. "We have all nine lots of section MM135 to ourselves. We'll pitch tent in lot 5."

A half-hour walk and they were there. Jok stood off as his residence went up, a synsilk house of many rooms, even a small private yard, his territory marked by four flapping banners. Carpets were unrolled, pillows brought forth. Two bandoliered monitors took armed station under the entry canopy. At last Jok settled to review his printer-listings, and find out how much genetics he'd have to relearn.

He scratched notes in the margins, working until the outside light grew dim, when he rose and moved out to view the sunset. He turned north, and east. "How—? We've left harbor! I never even felt it!"

Hashbaz broke from conversation with a Kwi seaman, a square-headed Celt with tight red curls fringing his face. The Kwi bowed, unsure of comparative status, grudging Jok a slight superiority. "My lord, ours are the ships that evacuated Africa, Europe, and the Near East, each passenger buying one precious meter of deck. You'll feel no turbulence, for they are brilliantly designed, the best ships ever made, each one a legend."

"I'd hate to have my meter on the edge of the deck," Hashbaz joked.

The Kwi turned. "People fell off, and sometimes deck-wars broke out between rival groups. But on the return leg of the journey the deck looked as now, practically empty."

"You still run passengers from China," Jok suggested.

"The courageous, the very rich, and those with connections. We no longer suffer the crowds of two hundred years ago. No one will accept them, and it's cruel to make people jump once their fares run out. Better they stay and learn to live like monkeys in the jungle."

"Seaman Carrick is here to warn us," Hashbaz interjected.

The Kwi made a second bow. "See that tent yonder? The man is on honeymoon with his bride, a rich widow, old and fat. Tonight he'll kill

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

her; he does it by injecting a poison. He's shipped with us before, those are his methods.

"I tell you so you'll be under no illusions. We Kwi live below, and by strict rules. One of those rules is not to impose ourselves above. Our two laws; do no damage to the ship, and pay your fare; otherwise we leave you to yourselves."

Jok turned to Hashbaz. "Lawless anarchy. Let's see to this widow. Invite them over for dinner."

Madam Calabis was pale and pulpy, monumentally unattractive. She smiled at her new lover, but saddened now and again as if her mind returned to her dead husband. Up and down her spirits ranged: She was almost kittenish when she remembered to be happy—Jok had never seen a woman of her bulk be kittenish, but that was the word for it.

The man was short, bald, and peppery on a narrow range of subjects, totally disinterested in agriculture, the Leninish Khanate, religion . . . horseracing was Yang's central obsession.

In the middle of the meal a servant whispered in Jok's ear. "Nothing. We searched Yang's tent, his chests—"

"Then he's got it with him. He'll call it food poisoning, and we'll be maligned. Don't let them alone together—Better yet, take him off now. Tell him I've something in back I want to show him."

After these muttered instructions Jok rose and left. He moved to the privacy of his screened yard, opened a chest at random, and smiled when the man bowed through the curtains.

"Take off your shirt. No, don't ask why. I've a secret for you. A present for your wedding night." Jok made small coaxing gestures. Confusedly Yang began to comply. As he reached mid-deshabille Jok dashed up and grabbed from behind.

Snared in his sleeves the man fought at a disadvantage, yet got hold of his syringe and pulled it from his waist-sash. The two tumbled through the curtain, treading clumsily among cushions. The dinner party rushed from the other room and froze in a circle of witness as Jok grabbed the wildly waving instrument. Two hands commanded one weapon, and for a moment liquid tracery looped through the air. Then the stronger hand shoved the needle into a naked back and injected the last drop.

Yang collapsed. Jok rose, his chest heaving. "Tell Madam Calabis I've saved her life, and accept responsibility for her as is my people's custom. Oh . . . sorry, here you are. Don't cry for Yang, he meant to murder you. Hashbaz, summon Seaman Carrick. He'll tell her the truth."

"You think I didn't suspect?" asked Madam Calabis. "Is death so bad?"

"Preferable to life with Yang. Madam Calabis, my establishment has only Hashbaz to run it. He could use help. You're not alone in this world as long as I'm here."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

* * *

Hashbaz bent over his writing desk. *Your Worship:*

In a week of travel Comrade Zhang Jok brought peace and order to our deck, and became its king; Madam Calabis and myself his faithful ministers.

But now I'm in a quandary. Our question is answered. I might leave him, assured the House of Souls deserves to become a shrine. Yet Jok's benefactions rank small in his own mind compared to the work he means to do, to rescue all China from the rootworm peril. And in this I'm inclined to offer help. They are not my people, but they are many and their need is great.

See how I've been seduced! I believe in this man. The old Hashbaz speaks to warn me I've caught a perilous disease, it's all trickery and sham!

The irony is that Jok tells me he was a nonentity in former times; a dull chrysalis broken to unveil the glories of a butterfly. But as the shores of China approach he is more silent, sulking in unspoken anger. His own people, and we know the troubles saints have among their own people. Have we made him a god by treating him as one? Will the Chinese unmake him by their disbelief?

Nevertheless they'll have trouble disbelieving, for Jok comes with an entourage. So we will see.

Hashbaz sealed his letter, and stepped outside. He found Jok and Seaman Carrick together and handed the Kwi sailor his envelope.

Carrick's functions included delivering as well as accepting post. "Never in my country's history was it possible simply to cross the border," Jok spoke wearily, a new packet in his hands. "I must claim the right to do so, or beg permission. At least I recognize the characters, though they seem degraded."

"If I can do any paperwork—"

"To my Chinese you are deaf, dumb, and illiterate. The best you can do is drill your monitors, and hold ready."

And the next morning—China! Night gave way to fog. An articulation in the gray wove skyward, and resolved into near hills. Hashbaz watched Jok sigh in relief. "It's the same, or hardly different. I don't know what I expected. Not much room to get worse, and if it was vastly better my rescue mission would seem impertinent."

But the docks *were* different; Uighurs and Hindis porting cargo, the dominant costume a girdled caftan instead of quilted coat and trousers. Jok and his entourage debarked and moved slowly, a procession in search of its object.

Soldiers, and a cadre. "You claim to be Comrade Zhang Jok?"

Jok handed over his papers. "I come to call Chairwoman Lao a liar,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

for her promises are neglected. Her New China was to have provided me a body, but I'm relegated to this barbarian carcass. I speak for millions of Chinese souls, thousands still on Earth. Where is their redemption if not in your hands?"

"Chairwoman Lao. Chair*woman* Lao! Were you so foolish? Did you think the mind of Great Lenin could incarnate in the body of a woman? She spoke with her voice only, not with His."

"Is that how you escape responsibility?" Jok asked.

The cadre nodded, careful neither to defer nor condescend. "In any case we still await New China. Times are bad. We'd sell more bodies and shelve more souls, if anyone would buy them."

Jok took stock. "It's as I thought. Your name?"

"Comrade Chotokai Srednek, a mere Siberian in point of fact—"

"But pleased to await the dawn of New China? Comrade Chotokai, I announce that dawn. Those you should have rescued will rescue you instead."

Chotokai raised an eyebrow. "Have your men march after mine," Jok commanded. "My destination is the city of Kunming."

"K'ming is on the verge of jungle," Chotokai answered. "The chop-and-burn zone, air reeking with smoke and toxins. You can see the wild canopy—"

"Then they need me there."

Years later a leaner, grayer Hashbaz hacked through a green-desolated landscape; houses exploded up and out, shoots twined to hold planks and pots in airy suspension. Eight-yield photosynthesis gave vegetation energy to suck up the rains and leach the fertility of the soil until nothing remained but canopy-shadowed bedrock, but the worst was behind him; here the human hand was still detectable; paddies kept their shape even if there was no water to flood them.

Hashbaz hiked northeast against the stream of traffic, answering the same questions again and again. "Yes, this is a road, the *best* road, however overgrown, but your bikes and handcarts are useless. Leave them behind, ration your water, and hurry."

After months of difficult travel he reached docks cluttered with abandoned ships and boats. The Prophet's credit was good: the Kwi carried him across the ocean to Calforna, where by virtue of a recent treaty with the Esreti he was able to ride a "passenger" train eastward, his bench near enough to the midsection doors to let him enjoy the mountain views.

But no tracks serviced Holy City. Hashbaz finished his long journey by horse. He took two days to recuperate, then filed for an audience with the Prophet.

The old man summoned him to the bedchamber where he lay ill, with-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ered flesh in a room of gleaming cream and gold. "Well?" the Prophet asked. "A long time without news. Thanks to an out-of-date letter your House of Souls is now immersed in sanctity and Texuns grow rich. Oh, sit—sit on the bed—our regal interior hardly allows for movable chairs. Sit, nephew, and tell your old uncle what you saw. It's been nothing but rumors here."

Hashbaz sat. "Your Worship . . . I wrote letters constantly, and rarely had courage to mail them. When I did I contradicted myself; but in any case it seems they were never delivered. About Jok being good or evil: I grew ungenerous these missing years. His work consumed my time and the careers of thousands. I'd have said he was supremely evil for demanding so much from so many, and he *would* have been evil if it was all a sham."

"But not so? He succeeded against the jungle?"

Hashbaz dropped his voice. "The jungle prospers. Millions fought it almost to a standstill, but they fight no more. All South China is hurriedly emptying through K'ming. Bearing strange seedstocks they fan out into the green, though all movement is slow and the land grows too choked for travel.

"Now belatedly the Khan condemns Jok, but soon the old Khanate will be a ghost-thing, and if desperate Leninim invade us through Alaska it will not be with irresistible numbers. Do you see, Your Worship? A string of dominoes, alternately bad and good, and Jok set them into collapse."

But the Prophet had no mind for the Khanate. "*Into* the jungle!" He struggled to sit up.

"With seeds. Hypertrophied pitcher plants provide reservoirs under hooded hair-weft decks. Sweet nectar-water and dry floors, and other weird varietals for food. The Garden of Eden revisited—I've been there. Miracle of miracles!"

The Prophet leaned back. "Can civilization survive in the jungle?"

Hashbaz shook his head. "No roads, no urban centers. Centuries ago Earth bled its best blood into space. Up there they remake worlds while we do nothing but compromise with nature, and at what a cost!"

"Compromise is better than death."

"I have two selves," Hashbaz answered. "One rejoices to see China's millions fed. The other warns that compromise destroys the chance of victory. We must face our problems. Nature must adapt to us, not we to nature. We must unite and master the ancient sciences—"

The Prophet rolled his head in the negative. "Even the ancients failed to defeat the jungle." Seeing Hashbaz keep silent, he elaborated. "We'll return Comrade Zhang's old brick to the House of Souls, and mark its location. If the rootworm jungle crosses to this hemisphere and threatens

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to overcome us, we'll give him a new body. I'll leave instructions to my successor."

"Is that all we can harvest from this?" Hashbaz stood. "I hoped you'd heal the turbulence of my spirit. I have meat for a hundred sermons about heroism and morality and persistence and exhaustion, and how salvation can blossom out of meekness, but I don't know whether to praise or condemn. Years of sacrifice made useless because I don't know; is humanity better off now or not?"

The Prophet laughed. "We preach against boxed souls and perversions of God's plan. Now we put our trust in the genius of one dead brick! You think my spirit's less troubled than yours? But I can do this. We don't want pilgrims traipsing through the House of Souls, do we? Carving initials and stealing souvenirs?

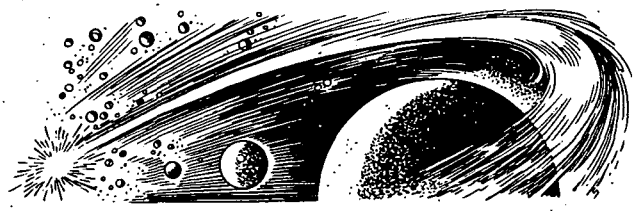
"Let's punish Comrade Zhang Jok for confounding our moral simplicities, and put the place under quarantine. Let his name be cursed from now until the day he comes back to life, to save our future generations!"

"Cursed? I'm not comfortable with that, either."

"Nevertheless you'll write up your life in this final light; an unambiguous testimony. You understand religious politics—at least you used to. I need that old Hashbaz at my side. Say amen, Hashbaz. Put your messiah behind you."

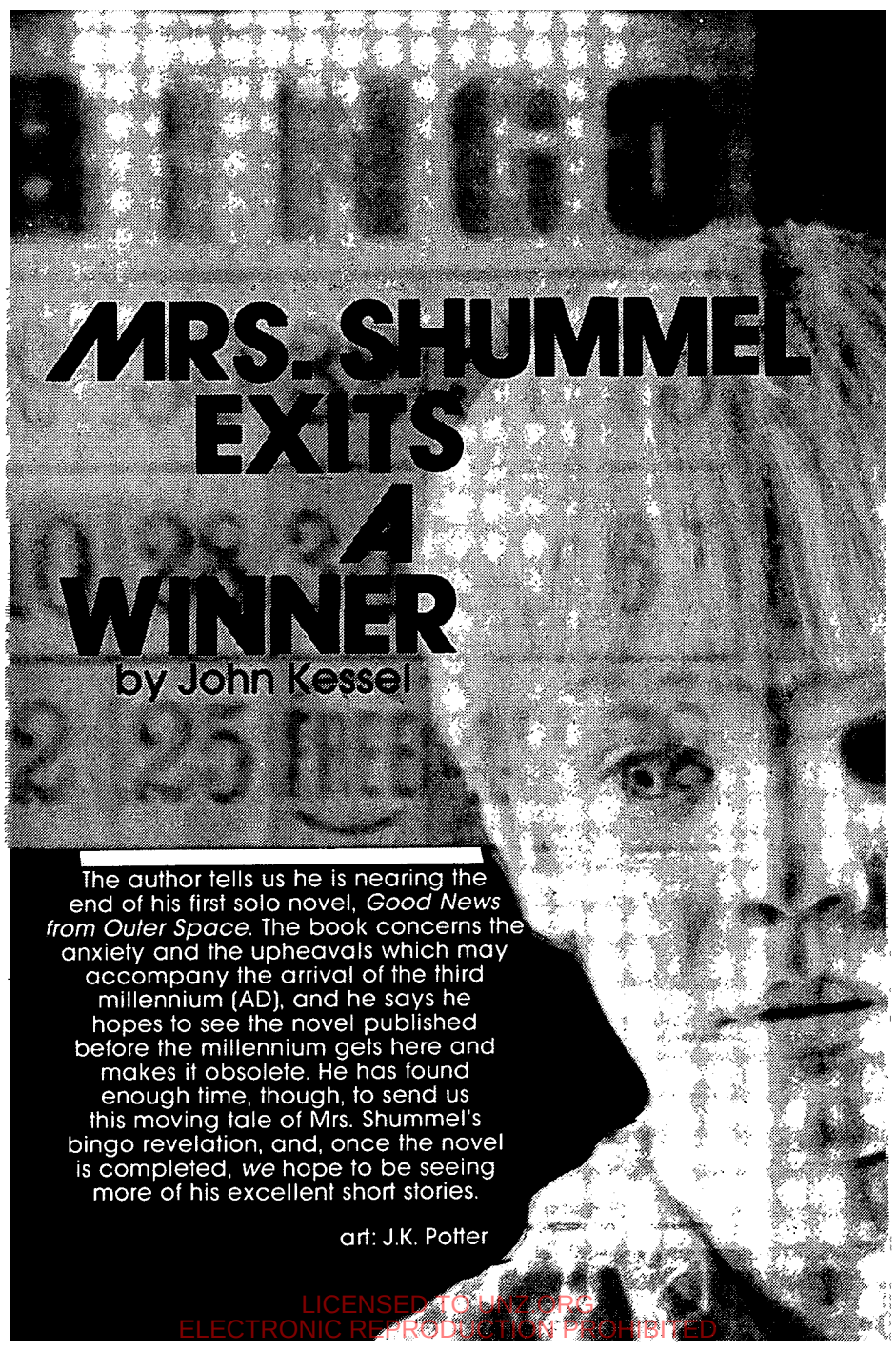
"A cursed messiah is a strange thing, Your Worship. If our church does this to him, what will Jok do to us when we need him again?"

"I cannot begin to conceive an answer. Now rest, Hashbaz. Rest and write new scripture, and may God inspire you." ●



The news magazine *Locus*, in its year-end wrap-up, recently said: "It (*IAsfm*) had the most well written fiction and some of the best science fiction stories published during 1987.... Easily the most lively of the magazines." Find out why—and why we recently placed an unprecedented nine stories on the Final Nebula Ballot—in months to come, when we'll be featuring major stories by **Lucius Shepard, Somtow Sucharitkul, Nancy Kress, Howard Waldrop, Robert Silverberg, Lisa Goldstein, Ian Watson, Avram Davidson, Orson Scott Card, Harry Turtledove, Judith Moffett, Isaac Asimov** himself, and many, many others.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



MRS. SHUMMEL EXITS A WINNER

by John Kessel

The author tells us he is nearing the end of his first solo novel, *Good News from Outer Space*. The book concerns the anxiety and the upheavals which may accompany the arrival of the third millennium (AD), and he says he hopes to see the novel published before the millennium gets here and makes it obsolete. He has found enough time, though, to send us this moving tale of Mrs. Shummel's bingo revelation, and, once the novel is completed, *we* hope to be seeing more of his excellent short stories.

art: J.K. Potter

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The bingo hall at the Colonel S.L.A. Marshall VFW Post was filling when Martha Shummel and her friend Betty Alcyk arrived. To the right of the platform where the machine sat waiting, in the gloom that would be dispelled once the caller stepped up to begin the game, hung the flag of Florida. To the left hung the tattered flag of the United States that Pete Cullum had brought back from Saigon. They said that the brown stain that ran up the right edge was from the mortal wound of one of the heroes who died in the Tet offensive, but although Martha did not question the story she always wondered how that could have happened unless he had wrapped himself in it. The rows of wooden tables with "Col. Marshall" stenciled on their centers were already half covered with mosaics of bingo boards; people leaned back in the folding chairs and filled the hall with cigarette smoke and the buzz of conversation.

Martha did not like getting there so late. She liked to be early enough to get her favorite seat, set her boards neatly in order, and sit back and watch the people come in. She would chat with her neighbors about children and politics and the weather while the feeling of excitement grew. Once a month or so she worked in the kitchen and sometimes on the other nights she brought in her special pineapple cake. It was like being in a club. You got together as friends, forgot how bad your digestion was or how hard it was to pay the bills or how long it had been since your kids had called. You took a little chance. Maybe when you left you still had to go back through streets where punks sold drugs on street corners, to a stuffy room in a retirement home, but for a couple of hours you could put that away and have some fun.

But Betty had not been ready when Martha came by. So instead of getting there early they got stuck in line behind Sarah Kinsella, the human cable news network. With Sarah you could hardly get a word in edgewise, despite the fact that she had emphysema and her voice sounded like it was coming at you through an aqualung. She told them about the UFO landing port beneath Apalachee Bay, about the Cuban spies pawing through her trash cans, and about how well her grandson Hugh was doing at the University of Florida—starting quarterback on the football team, treasurer of his fraternity, and he was making straight A's. Martha and Betty listened patiently even though they had heard it all before. Finally they got to the front of the line. Sarah bought five boards and headed past the table, down an aisle. The two women sighed in relief.

"He makes straight A's," Betty muttered.

"Yes," said Martha. "But his B's are a little crooked." They both laughed until their eyes were damp.

Ed Kelly, who sold the boards, smiled at them. "Come on, girls. Settle down. You're gonna wet those cute pants."

"Don't be fresh," Martha said. "Six." She handed over twelve dollars.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Betty bought three boards and they went their separate ways. Betty's eyesight was failing, so she insisted on sitting close to the front where she could peer up at the number board. But Martha's eyes were fine—she could handle the twelve game panels on her six boards without trouble—and the people who sat in front were too eager for her. They made her mad when they shouted "Bingo!" so loud, as if someone was trying to cheat them. Her own spot was over against the windows on the side, with her back to one of the mock Greek pillars. When she got to her place a young man was already sitting there. Martha began to put down her purse and boards. She started to say, "Son, this is my spot—" but then the boy looked up at her.

His tousled hair, in dazzling contrast to the narrow face beneath it, shone downy white. He had the darkest of brown eyes. His expression was one of dazed accusation, as if he had just awoken from being beaten senseless to find Martha gazing at him. His bruised eyes reminded her of David's. She stood there, holding the straps of her purse, neither setting it down nor picking it up.

Finally she managed to speak. "This is my spot," she said. "Please go someplace else."

The boy sighed. Instead of getting up he pulled a card and a stylus from the gym bag beside him. It was a magic slate, a film of plastic laid over a black background. Martha's children had played with such slates. On the slate, before he pulled up the plastic sheet to erase them, she read the words, CHARITY NEVER FAILETH. The boy cleared the old message and wrote, then held the slate up for Martha to see: FUCK OFF BITCH.

Martha felt her heart skip a beat, then race. Were people watching? Just when she decided to call one of the men, the boy pulled up the plastic sheet and the neatly printed block letters vanished.

He looked at her, then silently slid his slate and his single bingo board to the opposite side of the table. He walked around and sat, facing her, with his back to the front of the room and the bingo machine. He straightened his board in front of himself. Martha hesitated, then sat down. She spread out her boards, got the plastic box of chips and magnetic wand from her purse. She covered the free square of each panel with one of the metal-rimmed red chips. When she looked up again the boy was staring at her.

Martha wondered if she had seen him in the neighborhood. He was probably one of those boys who could get your prescriptions filled cheap. The intensity of his stare made her nervous and for a moment she wished she'd sat someplace else. But she'd be damned if she'd let some punk push her around, let alone a mute, retarded one. If you did that then pretty soon you were at their mercy. She'd seen it happen.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The boy sat back in the wooden folding chair, somehow managing to look innocent and alert at the same time. Martha had at first thought his hair was bleached, but now she decided it was naturally white. His face was cool as the moon on a hot night. Watching him, Martha felt her heart still sprinting, and she could not draw her breath. She did her best not to let on. It was like the beginning of one of her dizzy spells.

Trying hard not to be aware of the boy, she looked around the hall. From the kitchen at the back came the smells of pizza and hot dogs. Men and women returned from the bar carrying beer in plastic cups and slices of pizza on paper plates with the grease already soaking through. The light was dying outside the rows of windows, and the gabble of voices competed with the whir of the ceiling fans.

Martha could spot dozens of people she knew from the Paradise Beach condos, and those she did not know by name she recognized as regulars at the Colonel Marshall. They were of every color, Italians, Germans, Poles, Blacks, Cubans, Vietnamese, and Anglos, ex-New Yorkers and ex-Chicagoans and native Southerners, the physically fit and the terminally ill, Republicans, Democrats, Libertarians, and even Hyman Spivek who preached a loudmouthed brand of Communism, men turned milk white by leukemia and women turned to brown leather by the sun, Baptists, Jews, Episcopalians, Catholics, and Seventh-Day Adventists, some with money to burn and others without two dimes to rub together, tolerable people like Betty, and fools like Sarah. Most were senior citizens managing to scrape along on pensions and savings, talking trash and hoping to win the $250 coverall so they could enjoy themselves a little more before the last trip to the hospital. As decent a crowd of people, Martha supposed, as you could scrape together in all the panhandle of Florida.

All of which made the sudden appearance of this mute boy even more puzzling: he couldn't be any more than fifteen and he acted more like he'd grown up on Mars than in America. He was a total stranger.

Her heartbeat seemed to be slowing. It was almost time to begin. Tony Schuster passed by them up the aisle, joking with the women on his way to the platform. He fired up the bingo machine: the board lit up, the numbered balls rattled into the transparent box and began to dance around like popcorn on the jet of air. "First game," he announced through the P.A., "regular bingo on your cards, inside corners, outside corners, horizontal, vertical, diagonal rows. Ready for your first number?" The machine made a noise like a man with his larynx cut out taking breath, and sucked up a ball. "I-18," Schuster called.

Martha covered the number on two of her boards. One of them was an inside corner. "G-52." She had two of those, too, but they were on different panels from the first number. "G-47." Nothing. "I-29." Three covers. She looked up. Ed Kelly, now patrolling the aisles, was looking over the boy's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

shoulder: on his top panel the boy had covered the four inside corners. He seemed oblivious. "Bingo!" Kelly called out, just as Schuster was about to announce the next number. The crowd groaned; Martha sighed.

"I-18, I-29, G-52, G-47," Kelly read aloud.

"We have a bingo," Schuster called. The room was filled with the clicking of chips being wiped from several hundred boards, a field full of locusts singing. Martha ran her wand over her boards and pulled up her own chips while Kelly counted twenty dollars out to the silent boy. "Speak up next time, kid," Kelly said good-naturedly.

"He's deaf and dumb," Martha said.

"Can't be deaf, Martha—he's got his back to the machine. Whyn't you help him out?"

Martha just stared at Kelly, and he went away. Schuster began the second game, a series beginning with a fifteen-dollar regular bingo and ending in an $80 coverall. Martha tried to ignore the boy and the injustice of his playing only one board yet winning. She managed to get four in the "O" column before someone across the room yelled "Bingo!" She sighed again. In the follow-up, the inner square, she had gotten nowhere when a black woman in the front bingoed. While the attendant called out the numbers for Schuster to check, Martha glanced over at the boy's card. The inner square on one panel was completely covered.

Martha thought about pointing it out to him, but held back. He turned his face up to her. He smiled. She ducked her head to look at her own boards.

The kid was lucky but didn't even know it. Luck was like that. Who could say how the numbers would come: Martha only knew that they did not come for her often enough to make up for her losses. Only the night before she had blown twenty dollars when the Red Sox lost the series to the Mets. She had never seen as clear a case of bad luck as had cost the Sox the series. Martha had been a Red Sox fan since she was a girl. She had met her husband Sam at Fenway Park on June 18, 1938, Sox over the Yankees 6-2.

Sam was lucky about the Sox—he had won more than his share of bets on them over the years, which was no easy job—but not so lucky when the cancer ate him up at fifty-five. He had collected baseball cards. For fifteen years after his death Martha kept them, even though they didn't mean anything to her. Sometimes she would take the cards out of their plastic envelopes and look at them, remember how Sam would worry over them and rearrange their vacations so they could go to swap meets where he might pick up a 1950 Vern Stephens or Walt Dropo. He had cared for those cards more than for her. She would sigh in resignation. Staring at some corny action photo or head-and-shoulders shot of a bullet-headed ballplayer wearing an old-fashioned uniform, it would become

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

all she could do to keep from crying. She would slide the card back into its envelope, stick the envelope in among the others, shove the collection back on its shelf in the closet. She would poke at her eyes with the wrist of her sweater and make a cup of coffee. It would almost be time for "The Young and the Restless."

Of their three kids, Robert, the eldest, was a CPA in Portland, and Gloria bought clothes for Macy's in New York. Their youngest, David, her favorite, a beautiful boy—in some ways as beautiful a boy as this punk who insulted her in the Colonel Marshall—had died at the age of fifteen, in 1961. David had snuck off to Cape Cod one weekend with his friends. He did not have her permission, would never have gotten it if he had asked. Despite the fact that he had been a very good swimmer, he had drowned off the beach at Hyannis.

After that her life started to go to pieces. Sam and she had moved to Florida in 1970, and a year later he was dead, too. His pension had seemed to shrink as time went by. Last year she had sold the baseball cards to raise some cash.

"B-9." She placed her chips, glanced up from her board and saw the boy covering the number on his own, completing the outer square, covering the complete panel as well. He made no attempt to draw the attention of one of the men. Schuster called three more numbers. The kid had all of those numbers too, on the lower panel of his board. With the fourth number came simultaneous shouts of "Bingo!" from three spots around the hall. The crowd groaned. The boy just sat there. He didn't yell, he didn't sigh, he didn't even seem to realize that he had won, did not seem even to hear the babble of disappointed voices filling the room.

Martha felt herself getting mad. They ought not to allow such a fool into the place. She supposed she could call out for him, but that would only tie her to him, and he had insulted her. If he won, she couldn't. The men finished checking the winners' boards and divided up the money.

"Now, for the $80 coverall," Schuster announced. "I-22." Martha was so distracted staring at the boy's board, completely covered with red chips, that she forgot to check her own boards. "O-74."

"Bingo!" a man shouted.

The boy tilted his board and all the chips slid off onto the table.

The kid was trying to get to her. He had to have been cheating. That was why he had not called out—he knew that when the attendant came to check his board, they would find that he had not really won. She decided to keep an eye on him through the next game.

Schuster called five numbers. The boy had four of them, a clear winning diagonal that shot across the board like an arrow into Martha's heart. He remained mute as a snake, and somebody else won two numbers later. He had both of those numbers, too.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She sat there and, with an anxiety that grew like a tumor, watched him win the next five games in a row, none of which he called out. The room faded into the background until all there was was the boy's bingo board. Schuster would call a number, and it was as if he were reading them off the kid's battered pasteboard. Still the boy said nothing. He let other people take $150 that could have been his.

Martha had trouble breathing. She needed some air. But more than air, more than life itself, she needed that board.

By the time of the break after the tenth game, Martha's anxiety had been transformed from anger to fear. The boy had won every game and called out none. There was no way one card could win game after game unless the numbers on it changed from moment to moment, but as close as she watched Martha could not see them change. At the end of the last coverall, when two women, one of them Betty Alcyk, shouted bingo simultaneously, the boy looked up at Martha. Placidly, he pointed to the cards in front of her. She had not covered half of her own numbers. The boy wrote on his slate: DON'T YOU WANT TO WIN?

"Shut up!" she said, loud enough so that the people at the next table looked over at them.

He ripped off the old words and printed something new. He held up the slate and the bingo board simultaneously, scattering colored chips across the table. One of them rolled off into her lap. YOU WANT IT?

Martha bit her lip. She feared a trick. She nodded furtively.

He wrote: COME OUTSIDE.

The boy got up quickly and went out the double doors at the side of the auditorium without looking back at her. After a minute Martha followed. She tried to look as if she was simply going outside for a breath of air, and in truth the weight of the evening and her losses seemed to have lodged in her chest like a stone.

Outside, in the parking lot, a few men and women were talking and smoking. Paula Lorenzetti waved to her as she came out, but Martha acted as if she did not see her. She spotted the boy standing by the street under one of the lights. At first that reassured her, but then she realized it was only because he needed the light to use his slate.

When she got to him he held the bingo board out toward her. She took it, examined it. It seemed perfectly normal. A Capitol: dog-eared pasteboard, two game grids printed green and black on white, a little picture of the dome of the Congress in each of the free squares. In the corner someone had written, in childish handwriting, "Passions Rule!"

"How much?" she asked.

He wrote on the slate: YOUR VOICE.

"What?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

YOU WILL GIVE UP YOUR VOICE.

Martha felt flushed. She could see everything so clearly it almost hurt. Her senses seemed as sharp as if she were twenty again; her eyes picked out every hair on the boy's arm, she smelled the aroma of food from the hall and garbage from the alley. Across the city somewhere a truck was climbing up the gears away from a stoplight.

"You're kidding."

NO.

"How will you take my voice?"

I DON'T TAKE—YOU GIVE.

"How can I give you my voice?"

SAY YES.

What did she have to lose? There was no way he could steal a person's voice. Besides, you had to take a chance in your life. "All right," she said.

The boy nodded. "Good-bye," he said: softly, almost a whisper.

He lifted his chin and turned. Something in the way he did this so reminded her of the insolence with which David had defied her more than once, that she felt it like a blow—it *was* David, or some ghost come to torment her with his silence and insult—and she almost cried out for him to wait, to please, please speak to her. She hesitated, and in a moment he was down an alley and around the corner. She held the board in her damp hand. She moved, sweating, back toward the hall. She felt light; as if at any moment her step might push her away from the earth and she would float into the night.

She remembered making the long drive with Sam down to the hospital, fighting the traffic on the Sagamore Bridge. Sam had urged her not to go; it was no thing for a woman to have to do, but she had insisted in a voice that even Sam could hear that she was going. The emergency room was hot and smelled of Lysol. The staff had wheeled David from a bay in emergency to a side corridor, left him on the gurney against the wall with a sheet over him like a used tray from room service. For the first time in her life she had the feeling that the world was unreal, that her body was not her: she was merely living in it, peering out through the eyes, running her arms and legs like a man running a backhoe. There was David, pale, calm. His hair, long on the sides and in back so he could comb it into the silly D.A. that they had fought over, was still damp but not wet, beginning to stand away from his head. She touched his face and it was cool as a satin sofa pillow. Sam had had to pull her away, trying to talk to her. It was a day before she spoke to him and then it was only to tell him to be quiet.

"Martha!"

It was Paula, come across the lot to speak to her. "What are you doing?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Who was that boy?" She looked at the card in Martha's hand, looked away.

It took a moment for Martha to come back to reality. This would be the test. "Some punk kid," she said. "Hot night."

"It's that ozone layer. Messing up the air."

"It's always hot in October." Her voice flowed as easily as water.

"Not like this," said Paula.

"I like your blouse."

"This? It's cheap. If you don't like the pattern, all you got to do is wash it."

Martha laughed. They went back into the hall. Most of the people were already seated. Martha hurried to her place. She put her other boards aside and set the new one directly in front of her. Magenta chips for the center squares. Mel Shiffman, balding, athletic, wearing his teasing grin, took over the platform to announce the rest of the games.

"Settle down, settle down," he said, like a homeroom teacher coming into class just after the bell. "Eleventh game, on your reg'lar boards, straight bingo. First number: Under the O, 65."

The room was dead silent. Martha had that number, on the lower playing card—bottom right corner.

"B-14." Upper left corner.

"N-33." Middle top.

"N-42." No cover. Martha began to worry.

"O-72." Upper right. One more for the outer corners: B-1. B-1, she thought.

"B-1."

It was a flood of light, a joy that filled her, as if the number machine, the voice of Mel Shiffman, the world itself were under her control. "Bingo!" she shouted. The buzz of the people roared in her ears. Ed Kelly came by and checked off her numbers. "We have a bingo," Mel announced.

Kelly paid out twenty dollars to her. The bills were crisp and dry as dead leaves. "Inner or outer square," Shiffman called. The people settled down. "Next number: I-25." Both panels on Martha's board had that number. Shiffman called three more. Each number found its counterpart on her board. All her senses were heightened: the board before her, the grain of the wooden table it rested on, stood out with the three dimensionality of a child's Viewmaster picture; their colors were distinct and pure. In the air she could pick out the mingled smells of pizza and cigarette smoke and a wisp of bus exhaust that trailed through the window. She heard the gasps and mutterings of the restless crowd, could almost identify the individual voices of her friends as they hovered above their bingo boards, wishing, hoping, to win. Except Martha knew that they

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wouldn't: *she* would. As if ordered by God, the numbers fell to her, one by one, and the inner square was covered. "Bingo!" she shouted again.

She heard the groan of the crowd more clearly, an explosive sigh heavy with frustration, and immediately after, the voices: "Twice in a row." "She's lucky tonight." "I never win." "N-32; that's all I needed!" "She always wins." The last was the voice of Betty, from twenty feet away as clear as if she were whispering in Martha's ear.

Kelly came by and paid out the forty dollars. Forty dollars would keep her for a week. She could buy a new dress, get the toilet fixed, buy a pound of sirloin. "Looks like your night," Kelly said. "Or maybe it's just this table."

"I never won like this before," she said.

"Don't act too guilty," Kelly said, and winked at her.

She started to protest, but he was gone. There was something wrong with her hearing. She heard the people around her in too much detail, could pick out individual voices. The next game began. Martha tried to concentrate. She could feel the tension, and every sigh she heard as a number was called that was on her board and not on that of the sigher was like a needle in her chest. When the last number came, the one that both completed the outer square on her upper game panel and covered the entire panel, it was a moment before she could muster the breath to shout, "Bingo!"

The groan that came was full of barely repressed jealousy. Despair. Even hatred. It boomed hollowly in Martha's altered hearing. She looked up and saw envious faces turned to her. From across the room she saw Betty's peevish squint. The crowd buzzed. Kelly read the numbers off her board. Someone shushed someone else. Shiffman announced that this was indeed, miraculously, a valid bingo. Someone laughed. Kelly paid out the combined prize of $120, an amount that would see some of these people through a month. She smiled sickly up at him. He counted out the bills without comment.

It was all she could do to cover the free squares for the next game. Shiffman, so nervous now that his smile had faded for the first time in Martha's memory, began. The first four numbers he called, like a dream turning into a nightmare, ran a diagonal winner across Martha's board. When she stammered out "bingo," it was with half the force that she had managed before.

The cries of dismay were crushing. The hall seemed filled with envious voices. A worm of pain moved in her chest. She tried not to take the money, but Kelly insisted. Each bill as it was counted out was like a blow, and when he was at last done she could not find breath to thank him.

When, in the next game, she saw that she had won again, she realized

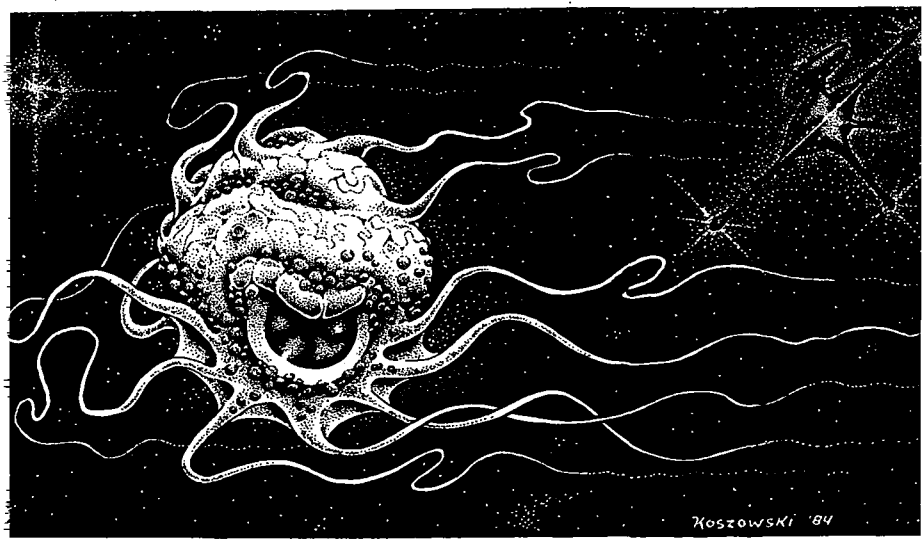
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that she could not stand it. She didn't even put chips on the squares, until at last another woman in the room shouted "Bingo!" The woman's triumphant screech was greeted by cheers.

Martha tried to leave, but her legs were too weak. She sat through the last games, watching her card, silent, as the pain climbed from her chest to her throat. Had she been able to face the rest, she could have taken every dollar. At last it was over. She gathered up her chips and markers and stumbled toward the door. Friends tried to talk to her. Betty Alcyk called her name. But the memory of Betty's voice among the others silenced her. She couldn't talk to Betty. Their friendship had been only a pact of losers, unable to stand the strain of one of them winning. But there was worse. If someone else had had the magic card, even if that person was the dearest one in the world to Martha—Betty—Sam, her lost husband—even her beautiful, lost son, David—would her own voice have held that same hatred?

The people filed out. Their voices rang in her head. She had nothing to say to them.

She wondered if she ever would. ●



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

IN MEMORIAM

by Nancy Kress

Sycamore Hill, an annual writers' workshop attended by many of today's most talented authors, has given this magazine a number of outstanding stories. We are told that one day at last summer's workshop was known as "Triple K Day" because John Kessel's "Mrs. Shummel Exits a Winner," James Patrick Kelly's "Home Front," and Nancy Kress' moving tale, "In Memoriam," were all critiqued at that meeting. That all three stories are to be found in the same issue of *IAsfm* is a coincidence; we doubt very much, though, that the high percentage of strong and publishable stories coming out of this workshop is at all coincidental.

art: George Thompson

PURCHASED AT WEBCO
IS BOOTLEG! THIS SCAN IS PROHIBITED

As soon as Aaron followed me into the garden, I knew he was angry. He pursed his mouth, that sweet exaggerated fullness of lips that hadn't changed since he was two years old and that looked silly on the middle-aged man he had become. But he said nothing—in itself a sign of trouble. Oh, I knew him through and through. As well as I knew his father, as well as his father had known me.

Aaron closed the door behind us and walked to the lawn chairs, skirting the tiny shrine as if it weren't there. He lowered himself gingerly into a chair.

"Be careful," I said, pointlessly. "Your back again?"

He waved this remark away; even as a little boy he had hated to have attention called to any physical problem. A skinned knee, a stiff neck, a broken wrist. I remembered. I remembered everything.

"Coffee? A splash?"

"Coffee. Come closer, I don't want to shout. You don't have your hearing field on, do you?"

I didn't. I poured him his coffee from the lawn bar and floated my chair close enough to hand it to him. Next door, Todd came out of his house, dressed in shorts and carrying a trowel. He waved cheerfully.

"I know you don't want to hear this," Aaron began—he had never been one for small talk, never one for subtlety—"but I have to say it one more time. Listen to Dr. Lorsky about the operation."

"Sugar?"

"Black. Mom—"

"Be quiet," I said, and he looked startled enough, but his surprise wasn't followed by a scowl. Aaron, who always reacted to a direct order as if to assault. I sat up straighter and peered at him. No scowl.

He took a long, deliberate sip of coffee, which was too hot for long sips. "Is there a reason you won't listen to Dr. Lorsky? A real, rational reason?" He didn't look at the shrine.

"You know the reason," I said. Thirty feet away in his side yard, Todd began to weed his flower beds, digging out the most stubborn weeds with the trowel, pulling the rest by hand. He never used a power hoe. The flowers, snapdragons and yarrow and azaleas and lemondrop marigolds, crowded together in the brief hot riot of midsummer.

Aaron waggled his fingers at the shrine he still wouldn't see. "That's not a reason!"

He was right, of course—the shrine was effect, not cause. I smiled at his perceptiveness, unable to help the sly, silly glow of a maternal pride thirty years out of date. But Aaron took the smile for something else: acquiesence, perhaps, or weakening. He put his cup on the grass and leaned forward. Earnestly—he had been such an earnest little boy, unsmiling in the face of jokes he didn't understand, putting his toys away

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in the exact same spots each night, presenting his teenage demands in carefully numbered lists, lecturing the other boys on their routine childish brutality.

A prig, actually.

"Mom, listen to me. I'm asking you to reconsider. That's all. For three reasons. First, because it's getting dangerous for you to live out here all alone. Despite the electronic surveillance. What if you were robbed?"

"Robbed," I said dryly. Aaron didn't catch it; I didn't really expect him to. He knew why I had bought this house, why I stayed in it. I said gently, "Your coffee's getting cold." He ignored me, pressing doggedly on, his hands gripping the arms of his chair. On the back of the left hand were two liver spots. When had that happened?

"*Second*, this business of ancestor worship or whatever it's supposed to be. This shrine. You never believed in this nonsense before. You raised me to think rationally, without superstition, and here you are planting flowers to your dead forebears unto the nth generation and meditating to them like you were some teenaged wirehead split-brain."

"We used to meditate a lot when I was a girl, before wireheads were invented," I said, to annoy him. His intensity was scaring me. "But Aaron, darling, that's not what I do here."

"What *do* you do?" he said, and immediately, I could see, regretted it. The shrine shone lustrous in the sunlight. It was a triptych of black slabs two feet high. In the late afternoon heat, the black neo-nitonol had softened into featurelessness, but when night fell, the names would again spring into hard-etched clarity. Hundreds of tiny names, engraved close together in meticulous script, linked with the lines of generation. At the base of the triptych bloomed low flowers: violets and forget-me-nots and rosemary.

" 'There's rosemary, that's for remembrance,' " I said, but Aaron, being Aaron, didn't recognize Ophelia's line. Not a reader, my Aaron. Bytes not books. Oh, I remembered.

In the other yard, Todd's trowel clunked as it hit a buried stone.

"It isn't healthy," Aaron said. "Shrines. Ancestor worship! And in the third place, time is running out for you to have the operation. I spoke to Dr. Lorsky yesterday—"

"You spoke to my doctor without my permission—"

"—and he said your temporal lobes still scan well but he can't say how much longer that will be true. There's that cut-off point where the body just can't handle it anymore. And then the brain wipe wouldn't do you any good. It would be too late. Mom—you *know*."

I knew. The sheer weight of memory reached some critical mass. All those memories: the shade of blue of a dress worn fifty years ago, the tilt of the head of someone long dead, the sudden sharp smell of a grand-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mother's cabbage soup mingled with the dusty scent of an apartment razed for two decades. And each memory bringing on others, a rush of them, till the grandmother was there before you, whole. The burden and bulk of all those minute sensations over days and years and decades, triggering chemical changes in the brain which in turn trigger cellular changes, until the body cannot bear any more and breakdown accelerates. The cut-off point. It is our memories that kill us.

Aaron groped with one hand for his coffee cup, beside his chair on the grass. The crows' feet at the corners of his eyes were still tentative, like lines scratched in soft sand. He ducked his head and mumbled. "I just . . . I just don't want you to die, Mom."

I looked away. It is always, somehow, a surprise to find that an adult child still loves you.

Next door, Todd straightened from one flower bed and moved to the next. He pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it to the ground. Sweat gleamed on the muscles of his back, still hard and taut in his mid-thirties body. The shirt made a dark patch on the bright grass.

A bee buzzed up from the flowers around the black triptych and circled by my ear. Glad of the distraction, I waved it away.

"Aaron . . . I *can't*. I just can't. Be wiped."

"Even if you die for it? What point is there to that?"

I stayed silent. We had discussed it before, all of it, the whole dreary topic. But Aaron had never before looked like that. And he had never begged.

"Please, Mom. Please. You already get confused. Last week you thought that woman in the park was your dead sister. I know you're going to say it was just for a second, but that's the way it starts. Just for a second, then more and more, and then it's too late for the wipe. You say you wouldn't be 'you' anymore with a wipe—but if your memory goes and the body follows it, are you 'you' anyway? Feeble and senile? Are you still 'you' if you're dead?"

"That isn't the point," I began, but he must have seen on my face something which he thought was a softening, a wavering. He reached for my hand. His fingers were dry and hot.

"It *is* the point! Death is the point! Your body can't be made any younger, but it doesn't have to become any older. You *don't*. And you have the bodily strength, still, you have the money—Christ, it isn't as if you would be a vegetable. You'd still remember language, routines—and you'd make new memories, start over. A new life. *Life*, not death!"

I said nothing to that. Aaron could see the years of my life stretching behind me, years he wanted me to cut off as casually as paring a fingernail. He could not see the other, greater loss.

"You're wrong," I said, as gently as I could, and took my fingers from

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

his. "I'm not refusing the wipe because I want death. I'm refusing it because too much of me has already died."

He stared at me with incomprehension. The bee I had waved away buzzed around his left ear. I saw his blue eyes flick to it and then back to me, refusing to be distracted. Linear thinking, always: was it growing up with all those computers? Such blue eyes, such a handsome man, still.

Next door Todd began to whistle. Aaron stiffened and half-turned to look for the first time over his shoulder; he had not realized Todd was there. He looked back at me. His eyes shadowed and dropped, and in that tiny sideways slide—not at all linear—I knew. I suddenly knew.

He saw it. "Mom . . . Mother . . ."

"You're going to have the wipe."

He raised the coffee cup to his mouth and drank: an automatic covering gesture, the coffee must have been cold. Repulsive. Cold coffee is repulsive.

I folded my arms across my belly and leaned forward.

He said quietly, "My back is getting worse. The migraines are back, once or twice every week. Lorsky says I'm an old forty-two, you know how much people vary. I'm not the easy-living type who forgets easily. I take things hard, I don't forget, and I don't want to die."

I said nothing.

"Mom?"

I said nothing.

"Please understand . . . please." It came out in a whisper. I said nothing. Aaron put his cup on the table and eased himself from the chair, leaning heavily on its arm and webbed back. The movement attracted Todd's attention. I saw, past the bulk of Aaron's body, the moment Todd decided to walk over and be neighborly.

"Hello, Mrs. Kinnian. Aaron."

I watched Aaron's face clench. He turned slowly.

Todd said, "Hot, isn't it? I was away for a week and my weeds just ambushed everything."

"Sailing," Aaron said carefully.

"Yes, sailing." Todd said, faintly surprised. He wiped the sweat from his eyes. "Do you sail?"

"I did. Once. When I was a kid. My father used to take me."

"You should have kept it up. Great sport. Mrs. Kinnian, can I weed those flowers for you?"

He pointed to the black triptych. I said, "No, thank you, Todd. The gardener will be around tomorrow."

"Well, if you . . . all right. Take care."

He smiled at us: a handsome blue-eyed man in his prime, ruddy with health and exercise, his face as open and clear as a child's. Beside him,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Aaron looked puffy, stiff, out of shape. The skin at the back of Aaron's neck formed ridges that worked up and down above his collar.

"Take care," I said to Todd. He walked back to his weeding. Aaron turned to me. I saw his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Mom. I am . . . sorry. But I'm going to have the wipe. I'm going to do it."

"To me."

"For me."

After that there was nothing else to say. I watched Aaron walk around the flowered shrine, open the door to the house, disappear in the cool interior. There was a brief hum from the air conditioner, cut off the moment the door closed. A second door slammed; Todd, too, had gone inside his house.

I realized that I had not asked Aaron when Dr. Lorsky would do the wipe. He might not have told me. He had already been stretched as far as he would go, pulled off center by emotion and imagination, neither of which he wanted. He had never been an imaginative child, only a practical one. Coming to me in the garden with his math homework, worried about fractions, unconcerned with the flowers blooming and dying around him. I remembered.

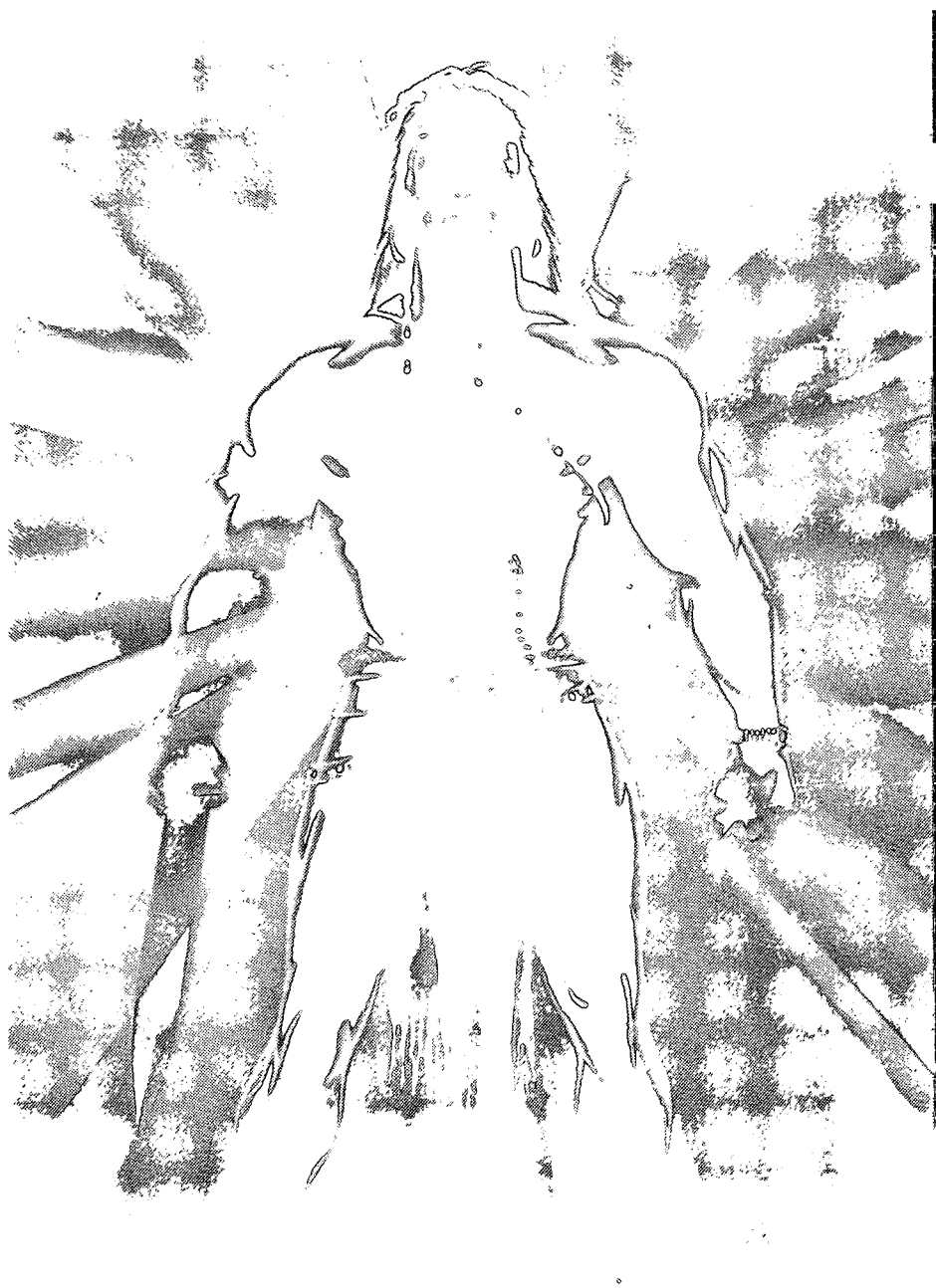
But *he* would not.

Todd came back outside, carrying a cold drink, and returned to weeding. I watched him a while. I watched him an hour, two. I watched him after he had left and dusk began to fall over the garden. Then I struggled out of my chair—everything ached, I had been sitting too long—and picked some snapdragons. Purple, deepened by the shadows. I laid them in front of the black triptych.

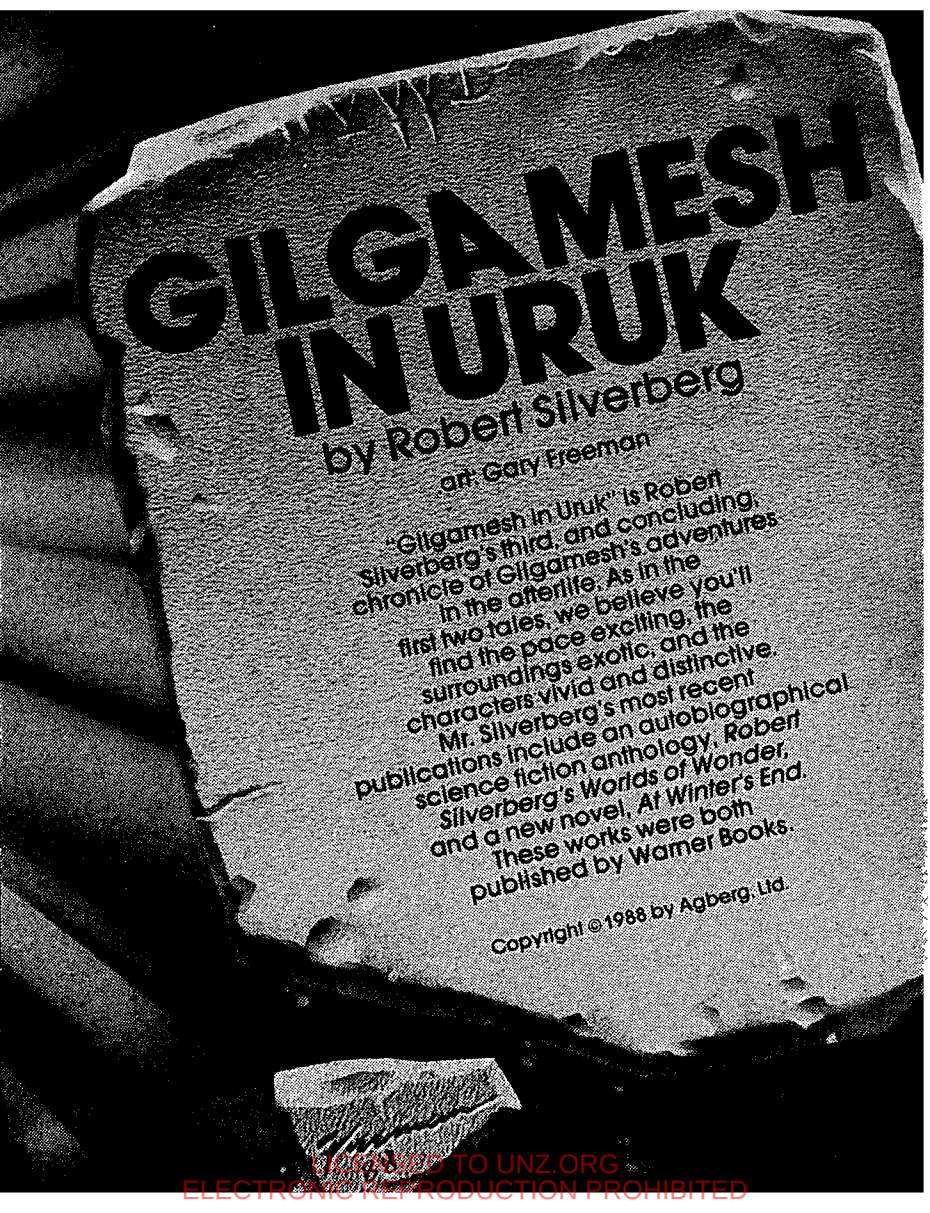
When Todd and I had been married, I had carried roses: white with pink undertones at the tips of the petals, deep pink at the heart. I hadn't seen such roses in years. Maybe the strain wasn't grown anymore.

The script on the shrine had sprung out clear and hard. I touched it with one finger, tracing the names. Then I went into the house to watch TV. A brain-wipe clinic had been bombed. Elderly activists crowded in front of the camera, yelling and waving gnarled fists. They were led away by police, strong youthful men and women trying to get the old people to *behave* like old people. The unlined faces beneath their helmets looked bewildered. They *were* bewildered. Misunderstanding everything; believing that remembrance is death; getting it all backwards. Trying to make us go away as if we didn't exist. As if we never had. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED


GILGAMESH IN URUK
by Robert Silverberg
art: Gary Freeman
"Gilgamesh in Uruk" is Robert Silverberg's third, and concluding, chronicle of Gilgamesh's adventures in the afterlife. As in the first two tales, we believe you'll find the pace exciting, the surroundings exotic, and the characters vivid and distinctive. Mr. Silverberg's most recent publications include an autobiographical science fiction anthology, Robert Silverberg's Worlds of Wonder, and a new novel, At Winter's End. These works were both published by Warner Books.
Copyright © 1988 by Agberg, Ltd.

UNCLAIMED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Oh dream of joy, is this indeed
The lighthouse top I see
Is this the hill? is this the kirk?
Is this mine own countree?

—Coleridge: *The Ancient Mariner*

"Surely you would agree, Gilgamesh, that it's better to reign in Hell than be a slave in it!"

"I think you have that phrase a little wrong," said Gilgamesh quietly. "But never mind. We have lost the thread of our discourse, if ever there was one. Did I mock you? Why, then, I ask your forgiveness, Sulla. It was not my intention."

"Spoken like a king. There is no grievance between us. Will you have more wine?"

"Why not?" Gilgamesh said.

The gritty smear of browns and yellows that was the western desert of Hell appeared to stretch on before Gilgamesh and his companions for a million leagues: past the horizon, and up the side of the sky. Perhaps it actually did. The narrow shoddy highway that they were following was vanishing behind them as soon as they passed over it, as though demons were gobbling up its cracked and pitted paving-stones, and ahead of them the road gave the impression of traveling in several directions at once.

Day and night the caravan rolled steadily onward across this dismal barren land. They were journeying up the coast above the island-city of Pompeii, hoping to find a city whose very existence was at this moment nothing more than a matter of conjecture and speculation.

Gilgamesh drank in silence. The wine was all right. He had had worse. But he could remember, after thousands of years, the joy that had come from the sweet strong wine and rich foaming beer of Sumer the Land. How many flagons he and Enkidu had quaffed together of that dark purple stuff, in the old days of their life! Indeed it made the soul soar upward. But in Hell there was no soaring, and the wine gave small joy. It was only a momentary tickle upon the tongue, and then it was gone. You expected no more, in Hell. Once, at the beginning, he had thought otherwise. Once he had thought this to be a second life in which true accomplishments might be achieved and true purposes won, and true pleasures could be had, and great kingdoms founded. Well, it was a second life, a life beyond life, no question of that. But the wine had no savor here. Nor did a woman's body, nor did a steaming haunch of meat. This was not a place where joy was to be had. One simply went on, and on and on. Hell was by definition meaningless, and so all striving within

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

it was meaningless also. He had come to that bleak awareness long ago. And it had puzzled him then that so few of these great heroes, these Sullas and Caesars and Pharaohs and all, had learned the truth of that in all their long residence here.

He shook his head. Such thoughts as these were not appropriate for him any more. No longer could he look with contempt on other men's ambitions, ever since he had had the Knowing of his soul at the hands of Imbe Calandola in Pompeii.

He reminded himself that he too had dabbled in kingship in Hell: even he, aloof austere Gilgamesh. Had quested for power in this chaotic place and gained it, and founded a great city, and ruled in high majesty. And then had forgotten it all and gone about Hell piously insisting that he was above such worldly yearnings.

Diabolical Calandola, the black cannibal chieftain and seer, had forced the troublesome reality upon Gilgamesh during his sojourn in Pompeii. The giant sorcerer Calandola, his body glistening with unguents made of human fat, awakening revelations in the Sumerian with a devil's brew of wine mixed with blood, and a monstrous sacrament of forbidden flesh.

Through his witchcraft Calandola had shown Gilgamesh New Uruk, the Uruk of Hell, and had stripped away the years to let him see what he had forgotten: that he too once had desired as others did to reign in Hell, that he had founded that great Uruk, that he had been its king. So it ill behooved him to scorn others for their ambitions and their pride in their achievements. He had forgotten his own, that was all. You could forget anything in Hell. Memory was random here. Whole segments of experience dropped away, thousands of years of hurly-burly event. And then would return unexpectedly, leading you into the deepest contradictions of spirit.

Gilgamesh wondered now whether the fever of power-lust that he had claimed so to despise might not seize him again before long. Hell was a great kindler of opposites in one's breast, he knew: whatever you were most certain you would never do, that in time you would most assuredly find yourself doing.

"*Look* at this place!" Sulla muttered. "Uglier and uglier. Worse and worse."

"Yes," said Gilgamesh. "We have reached the edge of nowhere."

Originally there had been seven Land Rovers in the expedition—the gilded bullet-proof palanquin of Sulla of Pompeii, who was not a king but who conducted himself as if he were; two lesser vehicles for Gilgamesh of Uruk and Herod of Judaea, who had been kings in their former lives but felt no need to burden themselves with crowns in Hell; and four more that carried baggage and slaves. But on the third day the roadbed had gaped suddenly beneath the rear vehicles of the baggage train and the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lastmost Land Rover had disappeared amid tongues of purple flame and the discordant wailing of unseen spirits. Then two days later Sulla's magnificent motor-chariot had developed a leprosy of its shining armor, turning all pockmarked and hideous, and its undercarriage had begun to melt and flow as if eaten by acid. So now five Land Rovers remained. Sulla, disgruntled and fidgety, rode with Gilgamesh, consoling himself with prodigious quantities of dark sweet wine.

Their goal was Uruk: not Gilgamesh's ancient Uruk in the land of Sumer on Earth, but the great and fabled New Uruk of Hell, which for all any of them knew might be only a figment of some liar's overheated imagination.

This supposed Uruk, Gilgamesh thought, could be anywhere: to the north, the south, the east, the west. Or some other direction entirely. Or nowhere at all. Uruk might indeed be only a rumor, a vision, a wishful fantasy: mere vaporous hearsay, perhaps. They might spend a hundred years in search of it, or a thousand, and never find it.

There was no denying the folly of this endeavor, then. But not to search for Uruk would be folly also.

Sulla had heard that it was a city overflowing with jewels, and there was nothing he coveted more. And by good report Gilgamesh had learned that in Uruk he was likely to find his long-lost friend Enkidu, whose company he desired above all else. How could they not attempt the quest, then? Even if Uruk did not exist, they must at least attempt it. If there are no beginnings, there are no fulfillments.

Sulla of Pompeii, squirming beside Gilgamesh in the lead Land Rover, said uneasily, "I thought we would be traveling through a region of marshes and lakes, not a desert. This place looks like nothing that was shown on the map the Carthaginian sold me."

Gilgamesh shrugged. "Why should it? The map was a dream, Sulla. This desert is a dream. The city we seek is possibly only a dream too."

"Then why were you in such a hurry to set out from Pompeii to find it?"

"Even if it may not exist, that in itself is no reason not to search for it," Gilgamesh replied. "And once we are resolved on the quest, searching sooner is better than searching later."

"No Roman would talk such nonsense, Gilgamesh."

"Perhaps not, but I am no Roman."

"There are times when I doubt that you're even human."

"I am a poor damned soul, the same as you."

Sulla snorted and handed a fresh flask of wine to a slave to have its cork drawn. "Listen to him! A poor damned soul, he says! Since when do you believe in damnation, or any such New Dead idiocy? And that note of sniveling self-pity! A poor damned soul! You couldn't snivel sincerely

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

if your life depended on it." The dictator of Pompeii accepted the opened flask of wine, took a deep thoughtful pull, nodded, belched. Sulla was a heavy-bodied balding man, blotchy-faced and red-eyed, a bold warrior gone soft outside from too great a fondness for drink. He offered the bottle to Gilgamesh, who drank indifferently, scarcely tasting the stuff.

"I spoke sincerely," Gilgamesh said after a time. "We are all damned in this place, though that seems to mean different things to different folk. And we are all poor, no matter how many caskets of treasure we amass, for everything is demon-stuff here, without substance to it, and only a fool would think otherwise."

Sulla went crimson, and his blotches and blemishes stood out angrily. "Don't mock me, Gilgamesh. I'm willing to accept a great deal of your arrogance, because I know you were something special in your own day, and because you have many qualities I admire. But don't mock me. Don't patronize me."

"Do I, Sulla?"

"You do it all the time, you condescending oversized Sumerian bastard!"

"Is it mockery to tell you that I accept the fact that the gods have sent me to this place with a flick of a finger—even as they have sent you here, and Herod, and everyone else who ever drew breath on Earth? Do I mock you when I admit that I am and always have been nothing but a plaything in their hands—even as you?"

"You, Gilgamesh? A plaything in the gods' hands?"

"Do you believe we have free will here?"

"There are some who rule and some who are slaves," said Sulla. "Even in Hell, I live in a palace bedecked with rubies and emeralds, and I have hundreds of servants to draw my baths and drive my chariots and prepare my meals. Here as once in Rome I am a leader of men. Is that by accident? Or is it by free will, Gilgamesh? By my choice, by my diligent effort, by my hard striving?"

"Those meals you eat: do they have any savor?"

"It is said I set the finest table in this entire region of Hell."

"The finest, yes. But do you get any pleasure from what you eat? Or is the finest not but a short span from the meanest, Sulla?"

"Jupiter and Isis, man! This is *Hell!* Nobody expects the food to have much taste!"

"But yet you have free will."

"The inconveniences of this place don't have a demon's turd to do with the question of free will, which in any case is a foolish issue, a lot of gasbag vapor dreamed up by New Dead idlers. Why are some men kings here and some slaves, if not that we shape our own destinies?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"We have debated this point before, I think," said Gilgamesh with a shrug. He turned away and stared out at the landscape of Hell.

Mean jagged cliffs that looked like chipped teeth rose on both sides of them. The air had turned the color of dung. The earth was palpitating like a blanket stretched above a windy abyss. Black gaseous bubbles erupted from it here and there. Everything seemed suspended in a trembling flux. A blood-hued rain had begun to fall, but not a drop reached the parched ground. Lean dog-like beasts that were all mouth and fangs and eyes ran beside the highway, leaping and screeching and howling. Far away Gilgamesh saw a dark lake that appeared to be standing on its side. The road ahead still veered crazily, drifting both to the right and left at the same time without forking, and seeming now also to curve upward into the sky. A demon-road, Gilgamesh thought, designed to torment those who dared travel it. A demon-land.

"The Carthaginian's map—" Sulla said.

"Was all lies and fraud," said Gilgamesh. "It turned blank in your hands, did it not? Its purpose was to swindle you. Forget the Carthaginian's map. We are where we are, Sulla."

"And where is that?"

Gilgamesh gestured with his hands outspread, and leaned forward, narrowing his eyes, seeking to make sense out of what he saw before him.

All was confusion and foulness out there. And, he realized, it was folly to try to comprehend it.

In Hell there was never any hope of understanding distances, or spatial relationships, or the passing of time, or the size of things, or anything else. If you were wise, you took what came to you as it came, and asked no questions. That, Gilgamesh thought, was the fundamental thing about Hell, the particular quality above all others that made it Hell. *You took what came to you.* Nobody was the shaper of his own destiny here. If you believed you were, you were only deceiving yourself.

Suddenly all the madness outside disappeared as if it had been blotted out. Thick gray mist began to spout from fissures in the ground and clung close as a cotton shroud, enfolding everything in dense murk. The Land Rover came to a jolting halt. The one just behind it, in which Herod of Judaea was riding, did not stop quite as quickly, and bashed into Sulla's with a resounding clang.

Then invisible hands seized the sides of Sulla's Land Rover and began to rock it up and down.

"What now?" Sulla grunted. "Demons?"

Gilgamesh had already swung about to seize his bow, his quiver of arrows, his bronze dagger.

"Bandits, I think. This has the feel of an ambush."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Faces appeared out of the mist, peering through the foggy windows of the Land Rover. Gilgamesh stared back at them in amazement. Straight dark hair, dark eyes, swarthy skins—an unmistakably familiar cast of features—

Sumerians! Men of his own blood! He'd know those faces anywhere!

A mob of excited Sumerians, that was who was out there—clustering about the caravan, jumping about, pounding on fenders, shouting.

Sulla, aflame with rage and drunken courage, drew his short Roman sword and fumbled with the latch of the door.

"Wait," Gilgamesh said, catching his elbow and pulling him back. "Before you get us embroiled in a battle, let me speak with these men. I think I know who they are. I think we've just been stopped by the border police of the city of Uruk."

In a huge dank basement room on the Street of the Tanners and Dyers, the man who called himself Ruiz sat before his easel under sputtering, crackling floodlights, working steadily in silence in the depths of the night. He sat stripped to the waist, a stocky, powerful man past his middle years, with deep-set piercing eyes and a round head that had only a fringe of white hair about it.

The work was almost going well. Almost. But it was hard, very hard. He could not get used to that, how hard the work was. It had always been easy for him up above, as natural as breathing. But in this place there were maddening complications that he had not had to face in the life before this life.

He squinted at the woman who stood before him, then at the half-finished canvas, then at the woman again. He let her features enter his mind and expand and expand until they filled his soul.

What a splendid creature she was! Look at her, standing there like a priestess, like a queen, like a goddess!

He didn't even know her name. She was one of those ancient women that the city was full of, one of those Babylonian or Assyrian or Sumerian sorts that could easily have stepped right off the limestone reliefs that they had in the Louvre. Shining dark eyes, great noble nose, gleaming black hair gathered in back under an elaborate silver coronet set with carnelian and lapis. She wore a magnificent robe, crimson cloth interwoven with silver strands and fastened at her shoulder by a long curving golden pin. It was not hard for the man who called himself Ruiz to imagine what lay beneath the robe, and he suspected that if he asked, she would undo the garment readily enough and let it slip. Maybe he would, later. But now he wanted the robe in the painting. Its powerfully sculpted lines were essential. They helped to give her that wondrously

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

primordial look. She was Aphrodite, Eve, Ishtar, mother and whore all in one, a goddess, a queen.

She was splendid. But the painting—the painting—

¡Mierda! It was coming out wrong, like all the others.

Anger and frustration roiled his soul. He could not stop—he would keep on going until he finally got one of them right—but it was a constant torture to him, these unaccustomed failures, this bewildering inability to make himself the master of his own vision, as he had so triumphantly been for all the ninety-odd years of his former life.

There were paintings stacked everywhere in the room, amid the ferocious clutter, the crumpled shirts, unwashed dishes, torn trousers, old socks, wax-encrusted candlesticks, empty wine-bottles, discarded sandals, fragments of rusted machinery, bits of driftwood, broken pottery, faded blankets, overflowing ashtrays, tools, brushes, guitars that had no strings, jars of paint, bleached bones, stuffed animals, newspapers, books, magazines. He painted all night long, every night, and by now, even though he destroyed most of what he did by painting over the canvases, he had accumulated enough to fill half a museum. But they were wrong, all wrong, worthless, trash. They were stale, useless paintings, self-imitations, self-parodies, even. What was the use of painting the harlequins and saltimbanques again, or the night-fishing, or the three musicians? He had done those once already. To repeat yourself was a death worse than death. The girl before the mirror? The cubist stuff? The demoiselles? Even if this new life of his was truly going to be eternal, what a waste it was to spend it solving problems whose answers he already knew. But he could not seem to help it. It was almost as though there were a curse on him.

This new one, now—this Mesopotamian goddess with the dark sparkling eyes—maybe this time, at last, she would inspire him to make it come out right—

He had made a bold start. Trust the eye, trust the hand, trust the *cojones*, just paint what you see. Fine. She posed like a professional model, tall and proud, nothing self-conscious about her. A beauty, maybe forty years old, prime of life. He worked with all his old assurance, thinking that perhaps this time he'd keep control, this time he'd actually achieve something new instead of merely reworking. Capture the mythic grandeur of her, the primordial goddess-nature of her, this woman of Sumer or Babylonia or wherever she came from.

But the painting began to shift beneath his hand, as they always did. As though a demon had seized the brush. He tried to paint what he saw, and it turned cubist on him, all planes and angles, that nonsensical stuff that he had abandoned fifty years before he died. *¡Mierda! ¡Carajo! ¡Me cago en la mar!* He clenched his teeth and turned the painting back

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

where he wanted it, but no, no, it grew all pink and gentle, rose-period stuff, and when in anger he painted over it the new outline had the harsh and jagged barbarism of the Demoiselles d'Avignon.

Stale and old, old and stale, old, old, old, old.

"¡Me cago en Dios!" he said out loud.

"What is that?" she said. Her voice was deep, mysterious, exotic. "What are those words?"

"Spanish," he said. "When I curse, I curse in Spanish, always." He spoke now in English. Everyone spoke English here, even he, who in his other life had hated that language with a strange passionate hatred. But it was either that or speak ancient Greek, which he found an even worse notion. He marveled at the idea that he was actually speaking English. You made many concessions in this place. Among his friends he spoke French, still, and among his oldest friends Spanish, or sometimes Catalan. With strangers, English. But to curse, Spanish, always Spanish.

"You are angry?" she said. "With me?"

"Not with you, no. With myself. With these brushes. With the Devil. How hellish Hell is!"

"You are very funny," she said.

"Droll, yes, that is what I am. Droll." He put his finger to his lips. "Let me work. I think I see the way."

And for a moment or two he actually did. Bending low over the canvas, he gave himself up fully to the work. Frowning, chewing his cigarette, scratching his head, painting quickly, confidently. The wondrous goddess-woman rose up from the canvas at him. Her eyes gleamed with strange ancient wisdom. And the painting turned, it turned again, it showed bones and teeth where he wanted robes and flesh, and when he fought with it it took a neoclassical turn, with gaudy late-period slashes of color also and a hint of cubism again trying to break through down in the lower left. An impossible hodgepodge it was, all his old styles at once. The painting had no life at all. An art student could have painted it, if he had had enough to drink. Maybe what he needed was a new studio. Or a holiday somewhere. But this had been going on, he reflected; since he had first come here, since the day of—he hesitated, not even wanting to think the filthy words—

—the day of his death—

"All right," he said. "Enough for tonight. You can relax. What is your name?"

"Ninsun."

"Ah. A lovely name. A lovely woman, lovely name. You are Babylonian?"

"Sumerian," she said.

He nodded. There was a difference, though he had forgotten it. He

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

would ask someone tomorrow to explain it to him. This whole city was full of Mesopotamians of various kinds, and yet in the five years he had lived here he had not managed to learn much about them. Five years? Or was it fifty? Or five weeks? Somehow you never could tell. Well, no matter. No matter at all. Perhaps this was the moment to suggest that she slip out of that lovely robe.

There was a knock at the door, a familiar triple knock, repeated: the signal of Sabartés. This would not be the moment, then, to suggest anything to the priestess, the goddess.

Well, there would be other moments.

He grunted permission for Sabartés to enter.

The door creaked open. Sabartés stood there blinking: his friend of many years, his confidante, his more-or-less secretary, his bulwark against annoyance and intrusion—now, maddeningly, himself an intruder. These days he had the appearance of a young man, with plump healthy cheeks and vast quantities of wild black hair, the Sabartés of the giddy old Barcelona days, 1902 or so, when they had first met. But for the eyes, the chin, the long thin nose, it would be impossible to recognize him, so familiar had the Sabartés of later years become. One of the minor perversities of Hell was that people seemed to come back at any age at all. It was not easy to get accustomed to. The man who called himself Ruiz looked perhaps sixty, Sabartés no more than twenty, yet they had known each other for nearly seventy years in life and some years more—ten? Twenty? A thousand?—in the life after life.

Sabartés took everything in at a glance: the woman, the easel, the scowl on his friend's face. Diffidently he said, "Pablo, do I interrupt?"

"Only another worthless painting."

"Ah, Picasso, you are too hard on yourself!"

He looked up, glaring fiercely. "*Ruiz.* You must always remember to call me Ruiz."

Sabartés smiled. "I will never get used to that." He turned and looked with admiration and only faintly disguised envy at the silent, stately Sumerian woman. Then he stole a quick glance at the canvas on the easel, and a sequence of complex, delicate emotions flitted across his face, which after the many decades of their friendship the man who called himself Ruiz was able to decipher as easily as though each were inscribed in stone: admiration mixed with envy once again, for the craftsmanship, and awe and subservience, for the genius, and then something darker, which Sabartés tried in vain to suppress, a look of sadness, of pity, of almost condescending sorrow not unmingled with perverse glee, because the painting was a failure. In all the years they had known each other in life, Picasso had never once seen that expression on Sabartés' face; but here in Hell it came flashing out almost automatically whenever

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Sabartés looked at one of his old friend's new works. If this kept up, Picasso thought, he would have to deprive Sabartés of the right to enter the studio. It was intolerable to be patronized like this, especially by *him.*

"Well?" Picasso demanded. "*Am* I too hard on myself?"

"The painting is full of wonderful things, Pablo."

"Yes. Wonderful things which I put behind me a million years ago. And here they come again. The brush twists in my hand, Sabartés! I paint *this* and it comes out *that.*" He scowled and spat. "*¡A la chingada!* But why should we be surprised? This is Hell, no? Hell is not supposed to be easy. Once I had only the dealers to wrestle with, and the critics, and now it is the Devil. But I beat them, eh? And I will beat him too."

"You will, indeed," said Sabartés. "What is the name of your new model?"

"Ishtar," said Picasso casually. "No. No, that's not right." He had forgotten it. He glanced at the woman. *"¿Como se llama, amiga?"*

"I do not understand."

English, he reminded himself. We speak English here.

"Your name," he said. "Tell me your name again, *guapa.*"

"Ninsun, who was the Sky-father An's priestess."

"A priestess, Sabartés," Picasso said triumphantly. "You see? I knew that at once. We met in the marketplace, and I said, Come let me paint you and you will live forever. She said to me, I already live forever, but I will let you paint me anyway. What a woman, eh, Sabartés? Ninsun the priestess." He turned to her again. "Where are you from, Ninsun?"

"Uruk," she said.

"Uruk, yes, of course. We're all from Uruk now. But before this place. In the old life. Eh? *¿Comprende?*"

"The Uruk that I meant was the old one, in Sumer the Land. The one that was on Earth, when we were all alive. I was the wife of Lugalbanda the king then. My son also was—"

"You see?" Picasso crowed. "A priestess and a queen!"

"And a goddess," Ninsun said. "Or so I thought. When I was old, my son the king told me he would send me to live among the gods. There was a temple in my honor in Uruk, beside the river. But instead when I awoke I was in this place called Hell—so long ago, so many years, everything still so strange—"

"You are a goddess also," Picasso assured her. "A goddess, a priestess, a queen."

"May I see the painting you have made of me?"

"Later," he said, covering it and turning it aside. To Sabartés he said, "What news is there?"

"Good news. We have found the matador."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"¿Es verdad?"

"Absolutely," said Sabartés, grinning broadly. "We have the very man."

"¡Espléndido!" Instantly Picasso felt an electric surge of pleasure that utterly wiped out the hours of miserable struggle over the painting. "Who is he?"

"Joaquin Blasco y Velez," said Sabartés. "Formerly of Barcelona."

Picasso stared. He had never heard of him.

"Not Belmonte? Joselito? Manolete? You couldn't find Domingo Ortega?"

"None of them, Pablo. Hell is very large."

"Who is this Blasco y Velez?"

"An extremely great matador, so I am told. He lived in the time of Charles IV. This was before we were born," Sabartés added.

"*Gracias*. I would not have known that, Sabartés. And your matador, he knows what he is doing?"

"So they say."

"Who is *they?*"

"Sportsmen of the city. A Greek, one Polykrates, who says he saw the bull-dancing at Knossos, and a Portuguese, Duarte Lopes, and an Englishman named—"

"A Greek, a Portuguese, an *Inglés*," Picasso said gloomily. "What does a Portuguese know of bullfighting? What does an *Inglés* know of anything? And this Greek, he knows bull-dancing, but the *corrida*, what is that to him? This troubles me, Sabartés."

"Shall I wait, and see if anyone can find Manolete?"

"As you have just observed, Sabartés, Hell is a very large place."

"Indeed."

"And you have been organizing this bullfight for a very long time."

"Indeed I have, Pablo."

"Then let us try your Blasco y Velez," Picasso said.

He closed his eyes and saw once again the bull-ring, blazing with color, noise, vitality. The banderilleros darting back and forth, the picadors deftly wielding their pikes, the matador standing quietly by himself under the searing sun. And the bull, the bull, the bull, black and snorting, blood streaming along his high back, horns looming like twin spears! How he had missed all that since coming to Hell! Sabartés had found an old Roman stadium in the desert outside Uruk that could be converted into a *plaza de toros*, he had lined up three or four bulls—they were hell-bulls, not quite the real thing, peculiar green-and-purple creatures with double rows of spines along with backs and ears like an elephant's, but *por dios* they had horns in the right place, anyway—and he had found some Spaniards and Mexicans in the city who had at least a glancing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

familiarity with the art of the *corrida*, and could deal with the various supporting roles. But there were no matadors to be had. There were plenty of swaggering warriors in the city, Assyrians and Byzantines and Romans and Mongols and Turks, who were willing to jump into the ring and hack away at whatever beast was sent their way. But if Picasso simply wanted to see butchers at work, he could go to the slaughterhouse. Bull-fighting was a spectacle, a ritual, an act of grace. It was a dance. It was art, and the matador was the artist. Without a true matador it was nothing. What could some crude gladiator know about the Hour of Truth, the holding of the sword, the uses of the cape, movements, the passes, the technique of the kill? Better to wait and do the thing properly. But the months had passed, or more than months, for who could reckon time in a sane way in this crazyhouse? The bulls were growing fat and sleepy on the ranch where they were housed. Picasso found it maddening that no qualified performer could be found, when everyone who had ever lived was somewhere in Hell. You could find El Greco here, you could find Julius Caesar, you could find Agamemnon, Beethoven, Toulouse-Lautrec, Alexander the Great, Velásquez, Goya, Michelangelo, Picasso. You could even find Jaime Sabartés. But where were all the great matadors? Not in Uruk, so it seemed, or in any of the adjacent territories. Maybe they had some special corner of Hell all to themselves, where all those who had ever carried the *muleta* and the *estoque* had gathered for a *corrida* that went on day and night, night and day, world without end.

Well, at last someone who claimed to understand the art had turned up in Uruk. So be it. A *corrida* with just one matador would make for a short afternoon, but it was better than no *corrida* at all, and perhaps the word would spread and Belmonte or Manolete would come to town in time to make a decent show of it. The man who called himself Ruiz could wait no longer. He had been absent from *la fiesta brava* much too long. Perhaps a good bullfight was the magic he needed to make the paintings begin to come out right again.

"Yes," he said to Sabartés. "Let us try your Blasco y Velez. Next week, eh? Next Sunday? Is that too soon?"

"Next Sunday, yes, Pablo. If there is a Sunday next week."

"Good. Well done, Sabartés. And now—"

Sabartés knew when he was being dismissed. He smiled, he made a cavalier's pleasant bow to Ninsun, he flicked a swift but meaningful glance toward the covered canvas on the easel, and he slipped out the door.

"Shall I take the pose again?" the Sumerian woman asked.

"Perhaps a little later," said Picasso.

The city was just as Gilgamesh had seen it in his vision, that time in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Pompeii when Calandola had opened the way for him and given him the Knowing. It was a shimmering place of white cubical buildings that sprawled for a vast distance across a dark plain rimmed by towering hills. A high wall of sun-dried brick, embellished by glazed reliefs of dragons and gods in brilliant colors, surrounded it. Looking down into Uruk from the brick-paved road that wound downward through the mountains, Gilgamesh could see straight to the heart of the city, where all manner of structures in the familiar Sumerian style were clustered: temples, palaces, ceremonial platforms.

It was for him as though the endless years of his life in Hell had fallen away in a moment, and he had come home to Sumer the Land, that dear place of his birth where he had learned the ways of gods and men, and had risen through adversity to kingship, and had come to understand the secret things, the truths of life and death.

But of course this was not that Uruk. This was the Uruk of Hell, a different place entirely, a hundred times larger than the Uruk of his lost Sumer and a thousand times more strange. Yet this place was familiar to him too; and this place seemed to him also like home, for his home is what it was, his second home, the home of his second life.

He had founded this city. He had been king here.

He had no memory of that—it was all lost, swallowed up in the muddle and murk that was what passed for the past here in Hell. But the Knowing that Calandola had bestowed on him had left him with a clear sense of his forgotten achievements in this second Uruk; and, seeing the city before him in the plain exactly as it had looked in his vision, Gilgamesh knew that all the rest of that vision must have been true, that he had once been king in this Uruk before he had been swept away down the turbulent river of time to other places and other adventures.

Herod said, "It's the right place, isn't it?"

"No question of it. The very one."

They were all three riding together in the first Land Rover now, Sulla and Gilgamesh and Sulla's prime minister, Herod of Judaea, with their baggage train close behind them and half a dozen of the low, snub-nosed Uruk border-guard vehicles leading the way. Herod was growing lively again, more his usual self, quick-tongued, inquisitive, an edgy, nervy little man. It had given him a good scare when the caravan had been halted by that sudden fog and surrounded by those wild-looking shouting figures. He had been certain that a pack of demons was about to fall upon them and tear them apart. But seeing Gilgamesh step calmly out of his Land Rover and all the wild ones instantly drop down on their faces as though he were the Messiah coming to town had reassured him. Herod seemed relaxed now, sitting back jauntily with his arms folded and his legs crossed.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"It's very impressive, your Uruk," Herod said. "Don't you think so, Sulla? Why don't you tell Gilgamesh what you think of his city?"

Sulla gave the Judaean prince a cold, sour look. He was immensely proud of his grotesque and fanciful Pompeii, that sorcerer-infested metropolis of baroque towers and clotted, claustrophobic alleys.

"I haven't seen his city yet, Herod."

"You're seeing it now."

"Its walls. Its rooftops."

"But aren't they the most majestic walls? And look how far the city stretches! It's much bigger than Pompeii, wouldn't you say?"

"Pompeii sits on an island," replied Sulla frostily. "Its size is limited by that, as you are well aware. But yes, yes, this is a very fine city, this Uruk. I look forward to experiencing its many wonders."

"And to getting your hands on its treasure," Herod said. "Which surely is copious. Is that the treasure-house down there, Gilgamesh, that big building on the platform?"

"The temple of Enlil, I think," said Gilgamesh.

"But certainly it's full of rubies and emeralds. My master Sulla is very fond, you know, of rubies and emeralds. He's here to fill his purse to overflowing with them. Do you think they'll mind in this town if he helps himself to a little of their treasure, Gilgamesh?"

Sulla said, scowling, "Why are you baiting me like this, Jew? You make me regret I brought you with me on this journey."

"I simply try to amuse you, Sulla."

"If you keep this up, it may amuse me to have you circumcised a second time," the Roman said. "Or something worse." To Gilgamesh he said, "Does any of it start to come back to you yet? Your past life in Uruk?"

"Nothing. Not a thing."

"But yet you're sure you lived here once."

"I built this city, Sulla. So I truly believe. I brought people of my own kind together in this place and gave them laws and ruled over them, just as I did in the other Uruk on Earth. But all knowledge of that has fled from my mind." Gilgamesh laughed. "Can *you* remember everything that has befallen you in Hell since first you came here?"

"If I had been king of some city before Pompeii, I think I would remember that."

"How long have you been here, Sulla?"

"Who can say? You know what time is like here. But I understand some two thousand years have gone by on Earth since my time there. Perhaps a little more."

"In two thousand years," said Gilgamesh, "you might have been a king five times over in Hell, and forgotten it all. You could have embraced a hundred queens and forgotten them."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Herod chuckled. "Helen of Troy—Kleopatra—Nefertiti—all forgotten, Sulla, the shape of their breasts, the taste of their lips, the sounds of their pleasure—"

Sulla reached for his wine. "You think?" he asked Gilgamesh. "Can this be so?"

"The years float by and run one into another. The demons play with our memories. There are no straight lines here, and no unbroken ones. How could we keep our sanity, Sulla, if we remembered everything that has happened to us in Hell? Two thousand years, you say? For me it is *five* thousand. Or more. A hundred lifetimes. Ah, no, Sulla, we are born again and again here, with minds wiped clean, and the torment of it is that we don't even know that that is the case. We imagine that we are as we have always been. We think we understand ourselves, and in fact we know only the merest surface of the truth. The irreducible essence of our souls remains the same, yes—I am always Gilgamesh, he is Herod, you are Sulla, we make the choices over and over that someone of our nature must make—but the conditions of our lives fluctuate, we are tossed about on the hot winds of Hell, and most of what happens to us is swallowed eventually into oblivion. This is the wisdom that came to me from the Knowing I had of Calandola."

"That barbarian! That devil!"

"Nevertheless. He sees behind the shallow reality of Hell. I accept the truth of his revelation."

"You may have forgotten Uruk, Gilgamesh," said Herod, "but Uruk seems not to have forgotten you."

"So it would appear," said Gilgamesh.

Indeed it had startled him profoundly when the Sumerian border guards had hailed him at once as Gilgamesh the king. Hardly was he out of the Land Rover but they were kneeling to him and making holy signs, and crying out to him in the ancient language of the Land, which he had not heard spoken in so long a time that it sounded strange and harsh to his ears. It was as if he had left this city only a short while before—whereas he knew that even by the mysterious time-reckoning of Hell it was a long eternity since last he could have dwelled here. His memory was clear on that point, for he knew that he had spent his most recent phase of his time in Hell roving the hinterlands with Enkidu, hunting the strange beasts of the Outback, shunning the intrigues and malevolences of the cities—and surely that period in the wilderness had lasted decades, even centuries. Yet in Uruk his face and form seemed familiar to all.

Well, he would know more about that soon enough. Perhaps they held him in legendary esteem here and prayed constantly for his return. Or,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

more likely, it was merely some further manifestation of Hell's witchery that spawned these confusions.

They were practically in Uruk now. The road out of the hills had leveled out. A great brazen gate inscribed with the images of serpents and monsters rose up before them. It swung open as they neared it, and the entire procession rolled on within.

Sulla, far gone in wine, clapped the Sumerian lustily on the shoulder. "Uruk, Gilgamesh! We're actually here! Did you think we'd ever find it?"

"It found us," said Gilgamesh coolly. "We were lost in a land between nowhere and nowhere, and suddenly Uruk lay before us. So we are here, Sulla: but where is it that we are?"

"Ah, Gilgamesh, Gilgamesh, what a sober thing you are! We are in Uruk, wherever that may be! Rejoice, man! Smile! Lift up your heart! This city is your home! Your friend will be here—what's his name, Inkibu, Tinkibu—"

"Enkidu."

"Enkidu, yes. And your cousins, your brothers, perhaps your father—"

"This is Hell, Sulla. Delights turn to ashes on our tongues. I expect nothing here."

"You'll be a king again. Is that nothing?"

"Have I said I feel any wish to rule this place?" Gilgamesh asked, glowering at the Roman.

Sulla blinked in surprise. "Why, Herod says you do."

"He does?" Gilgamesh skewered the little man with a fierce glare. "Who are you to pretend to speak what is in my mind? How do you imagine you dare know my heart?"

In a small voice Herod said, shrinking back as though he expected to be hit, "It is because I was with you when you had the Knowing, Gilgamesh. And had the Knowing with you. Have you forgotten that so soon?"

Gilgamesh considered that. He could not deny the truth of it.

Quietly he said, "This city must already have some king of its own. I have no thought to displace him. But if the gods have that destiny in mind for me—"

"Not the gods, Gilgamesh. The demons. This place is Hell," Herod reminded him.

"The demons, yes," said Gilgamesh. "Yes."

They were well within Uruk now and the caravan had come to rest in the midst of a huge plaza. At close range Gilgamesh saw that Uruk was only superficially a Sumerian city: many of the buildings were in the ancient style, yes, but there was everything else here too, all periods and styles, the hideous things that they called office buildings, and the sullen bulk of a power-plant spewing foulness into the air, and an ominous-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

looking barracks of dirty red brick without windows, and something that looked like a Roman lawcourt or palace off to one corner. A crowd was gathered outside the Land Rover, many in Sumerian dress but by no means all; there was the usual Hellish mix, Old Dead and New, garbed in all the costumes of the ages. Everyone was staring. Everyone was silent.

"You get out first," Sulla said to Gilgamesh.

He nodded. A gaggle of what were obviously municipal officials, plainly Sumerian by race, had assembled alongside the Land Rover. They were looking in at him expectantly. They seemed worried, or at least puzzled, by his presence here.

He stepped out, looming like a giant above them all.

A man with a thick curling black beard and a shaven skull, who wore the woolen tunic of Sumer the Land, came forward and said—in English—"We welcome Gilgamesh the son of Lugalbanda to the city of Uruk, and his friends. I am the arch-vizier Ur-ninmarka, servant to Dumuzi the king, whose guests you are."

"Dumuzi?" said Gilgamesh, astonished.

"He is king in Uruk, yes."

"He who ruled before me, when we lived on Earth?"

Ur-ninmarka shrugged. "I know nothing of that. I was a man of Lagash in the Land that was, and Uruk was far away. But Dumuzi is king here, and he has sent me to give you greeting and escort you to your lodgings. Tonight you will dine with him and with the great ones of the city."

Dumuzi, Gilgamesh thought in wonder. That pathetic weakling! That murderous swine! Surely it is the same one; for in Hell everything that has befallen befalls over and over, and so Dumuzi is king in Uruk once again, the same Dumuzi who in the old life, fearing Gilgamesh the son of Lugalbanda as a rival, had sent assassins to slay him, though he was then only a boy. Those assassins had failed, and in the end it was Dumuzi who went from the world and Gilgamesh who had the throne. No doubt he fears me yet, Gilgamesh suspected. And will try his treacheries on me a second time. Some things never change, thought Gilgamesh: it is the way of Hell. As Dumuzi will learn to his sorrow, if he has new villainy in mind.

Aloud he said, "It will please me greatly to enjoy the hospitality of your king. Will you tell him that?"

"That I will."

"And tell him too that he will be host to Sulla, ruler of the great city of Pompeii, and to his prime minister, Herod of Judaea, who are my traveling companions."

Ur-ninmarka bowed.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"One further thing," said Gilgamesh. "I take it there are many citizens of Sumer the Land dwelling in this city."

"A great many, my lord."

"Can you say, is there a certain Enkidu here, a man of stature as great as my own, and very strong of body, and hairy all over, like a beast of the fields? He who is well known everywhere to be my friend, and whom I have come here to seek?"

The arch-vizier's bare brow furrowed. "I cannot say, my lord. I will make inquiries, and you will have a report this evening when you dine at the palace."

"I am grateful to you," said Gilgamesh.

But his heart sank. Enkidu must not be here after all; for how could Ur-ninmarka fail to know of it, if a great roistering shaggy giant such as Enkidu had come to Uruk? There is no city in Hell so big that Enkidu would not be conspicuous in it, and more than conspicuous, thought Gilgamesh.

He kept these matters to himself. Beckoning Sulla and Herod from the Land Rover, he said only, "All is well. Tonight we will be entertained by Uruk's king."

Dumuzi, at any rate, seemed to do things with style. For his visitors he provided sumptuous lodgings in a grand hostelry back of the main temple, a massive block of a building that seemed to have been carved of a single slab of black granite. Within were fountains, arcades, so much statuary that it was hard to move about without bumping into something, and towering purple-leaved palm trees growing in huge ruby-red planters that glistened like genuine rubies. Perhaps they were. Gilgamesh saw Sulla fondling one covetously as though contemplating how many hundreds of egg-sized stones it could be broken into.

Each of the travelers had a palatial room to himself, a broad bed covered in silk, a sunken alabaster tub, a mirror that shimmered like a window into Paradise. Of course, there were little things wrong amid all this perfection: no hot water was running, and a line of disagreeable-looking fat-bellied furry insects with emerald eyes went trooping constantly across the ceiling of Gilgamesh's room, and when he sprawled on the bed it set up a steady complaining moan, as though he were lying on the protesting forms of living creatures. But this was Hell, after all. One expected flaws in everything, and one always got them. All things considered, these accommodations could hardly be excelled.

Half a dozen sycophants appeared as if from a closet to help Gilgamesh with his bath, and anoint him with fragrant oils, and garb him in a white flounced woolen robe that left him bare to the waist in the Sumerian manner. After a time Herod came knocking at the door, and he too was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

garbed after the fashion of Sumer, though he still wore his gleaming Italian leather shoes instead of sandals, and he had his little Jewish skullcap on his head. His dark curling hair had been pomaded to a high gloss.

"Well?" he said, preening. "Do I look like a prince of Sumer the Land, Gilgamesh?"

"You look like a fop, as always. And a weakling, besides. At least your toga would have covered those flabby arms of yours and that spindly chest."

"Ah, Gilgamesh! What need do I have of muscles, when I have *this?"* He touched his hand to his head. "And when I have the brave Gilgamesh the king to protect me against malefactors."

"But will I, though?"

"Of course you will." Herod smiled. "You feel sorry for me, because I have to live by my wits all the time and don't have any other way of defending myself. You'll look after me. It's not in your nature to let someone like me be endangered. Besides, you need me."

"I do?"

"You've lived in the Outback too long. You've got bits of straw in your hair."

Automatically Gilgamesh reached up to search.

"No, no, you foolish ape, not literally!" said Herod, laughing. "I mean only that you've been out of things. You don't understand the modern world. You need me to explain reality to you. You stalk around being heroic and austere and noble, which is fine in its way, but you've been paying no attention to what's really been going on in Hell lately. The fashions, the music, the art, the new technology."

"These things are of no importance to me. Fashion? And music? Music is mere tinkling in my ear. Art is decoration, a trivial thing. As for this new technology you speak of, it is an abomination. I despise all the inventions of the New Dead."

"Despise them all you like, but they're here to stay. The New Dead outnumber us a thousand to one, and more of them arrive every day. You can't just ignore them. Or their technology."

"I can."

"So you may think. A bow and a couple of arrows, that's good enough for you, right? But you keep running afoul of things you don't comprehend. You blunder on and on and you get yourself out of trouble most of the time pretty well, but you fundamentally don't know what's what, and sooner or later you'll come up against something that's too much even for you. Whereas I have kept up with modern developments, and I can guide you through all the pitfalls. I'm aware, Gilgamesh. I know what's happening. I stay in touch. Politics, for example. Do you have the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

foggiest notion of the current situation? The really spectacular upheavals that are going on right now?"

"I take great care not to think of them."

"You think it's safe, keeping your head in the sand that way? What happens on the far side of Hell can have a tremendous impact on how we operate here. This isn't your ancient world, where it took forever and a half just to carry the news from Rome to Syria. Do you know what a radio is? A telephone? A microwave relay? Like it or not, we're all New Dead now. You may still be living like a Sumerian, but the rest of the people here are neck-deep in modern life."

"They have my compassion," said Gilgamesh.

"You don't know the slightest thing about the revolutionary movements swirling in half a dozen cities back East, do you? The whole Dissidence? The Rebellion against the Administration? What Achilles is doing, and Ché Guevara, and Frederick Barbarossa? The latest deeds of Rameses? The present status of Hadrian? No, no, Gilgamesh, you're out of things. And proud of your ignorance. Whereas I have kept up with the news, and—"

"I have spent time in New Hell, Herod. I have seen Julius Caesar and Machiavelli and Augustus and Kleopatra and the rest of that crowd putting together their petty schemes. Why do you think I went to the Outback? I wept with boredom after half an hour among them. Their intrigues were like the squeakings of so many mice to me. Whatever they may be planning to do, it will all wash away like a castle of sand by the edge of the sea, and Hell will go on and on as it always has. And so will I. The demons who are the masters here laugh at the pretensions of the rebellious ones. And so do I. No, Herod, I haven't any need of your guidance. If I choose to protect you against harm, it'll be out of mercy, not out of self-interest." He glanced at his watch. "It grows late. We should be on our way to the feast."

"The wristwatch you wear is a despised invention of the New Dead."

"I take what I choose from among their things," said Gilgamesh. "I choose very little. You are not the first to try to mock me for inconsistency. But I know who I am, Herod, and I know what I believe."

"Yes," Herod said, in a tone that was its own negation. "How could anyone have doubt of that?"

Gilgamesh might have pitched him from the window just then, but the sycophants returned to lead them to the feasting-hall. Sulla, waiting for them amid the splendors of the lobby, greeted them with wine-flushed face. He had spurned Sumerian robes altogether and was decked out in a purple toga and high gilded buskins in the Greek style.

As they moved toward the door Sulla caught Gilgamesh by the wrist

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and said quietly, "One moment. Tell me about this king we are about to meet, this Dumuzi."

"If it is the same one, he succeeded my father Lugalbanda on the throne of Uruk—the first Uruk—when I was a boy, and drove me into exile. He was a coward and a fool, who neglected the rites and squandered public funds on ridiculous adventures, and the gods withdrew the kingship from him and he died. Which made the way clear for me to become king."

Sulla nodded. "You had him murdered, then?"

Gilgamesh's eyes widened. Then he laughed, seeing how quickly Sulla had drawn the correct conclusion of murder from the innocent phrase, *the gods withdrew the kingship from him.* This man might be a drunkard but his mind was still shrewd.

"Not I, Sulla. I had nothing to do with it. I was in exile then; it was the great men of the city who saw that Dumuzi must go, and the priestess Inanna who actually gave him the poison, telling him it was a healing medicine for an illness he had."

"Mmm," said Sulla. "You and he take turns succeeding one another in the kingship of Uruk, here and in the former life. Now it's his turn to rule. And yours may be due to come again soon. Everything revolves in an endless circle."

"It is the way of this place. I am used to it."

"He was afraid of you once. He'll be afraid of you still. There'll be old grudges at work tonight. Perhaps an attempt at some settling of scores."

"Dumuzi has never frightened me," said Gilgamesh, making the gesture one might make to flick away a troublesome fly.

Sabartés said, "Which is it, Pablo, that has you so excited these days? That you have a new mistress, or that we are finally to have a bullfight for you to attend?"

"Do you think I am excited, brother?"

With a sweeping gesture Sabartés indicated the litter of sketches all about the studio, the dozen new half-finished canvases turned to the wall, the bright splotches everywhere where Picasso, in his haste, had overturned paints and not bothered to wipe them up. "You are like a man on fire. You work without stopping, Pablo."

"Ah, and is that something new?" Rummaging absentmindedly in a pile of legal documents, Picasso found one with a blank side and began quickly to draw a caricature of his friend, the high forehead, the thick glasses, the soft fleshy throat. A little to his surprise he saw that what he was drawing was the old pedantic Sabartés of the last years on Earth, not the incongruously young Bohemian Sabartés who in fact stood before him now. And then the sketch changed with half a dozen swift inadvertent strokes and became not Sabartés but a demon with fangs and a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

flaming snout. Picasso crumpled it and tossed it aside. To Sabartés he said, "She will be here soon. Do you have anything you must tell me?"

"Then it *is* the woman, Pablo."

"She is splendid, is she not?"

"They were all splendid. La Belle Chelita was splendid, the one from the strip-tease place. Fernande was splendid. Eva was splendid. Marie-Therese was splendid. Dora Maar was—"

"*Bastante*, Sabartés!"

"I mean no offense, Pablo. It is only that I see now that Picasso has chosen once more a new woman, a woman who is as fine as the ones who went before her, and—"

"You will call me Ruiz, brother."

"It is hard," said Sabartés. "It is so very hard."

"Ruiz was my father's name. It is an honest name for calling me."

"The world knows you as Picasso. All of Hell will know you as Picasso too as time goes along."

Picasso scowled and began a new sketch of Sabartés, which began almost at once to turn into a portrait of El Greco, elongated face and deep-set sorrowful eyes, and then, maddeningly, into the face of a goat. Again he threw the sheet aside. He would not mind these metamorphoses if they were of his own choosing. But this was intolerable, that he could not control them. *Painting*, he had liked to tell people in his life before this life, *is stronger than I am. It makes me do what it wants.* But now he realized that he must have been lying when he said that; for it was finally happening to him, just that very thing, and he did not like it at all.

He said, "I prefer now to be known as Ruiz. That way none of my heirs will find me here. They are very angry with me, brother, for not having left a will, for having forced them to fight in the courts for year after year. I would rather not see them. Or any of the women who are looking for me. We move on, Sabartés. we must not let the past pursue us. I am Ruiz now."

"And you think that by calling yourself a name that is not Picasso you can hide from your past, though you look the same and you act the same and you paint day and night? Pablo, Pablo, you deceive only yourself! You could call yourself Mozart and you would still be Picasso."

The telephone rang.

"Answer it," said Picasso brusquely.

Sabartés obeyed. After a moment he put his hand over the receiver and looked up.

"It is your Sumerian priestess," said Sabartés.

Picasso leaned forward, tense, apprehensive, already furious. "She is canceling the sitting?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"No, no, nothing like that. She will be here in a little while. But she says King Dumuzi has asked her to attend a feast at the royal hall tonight, and that you are invited to accompany her."

"What do I have to do with King Dumuzi?"

"She asks you to be her escort."

"I have work to do. You know I am not one to go to royal feasts."

"Shall I tell her that, Pablo?"

"Tell her—wait. Wait. Let me think. Speak with her, Sabartés. Tell her—ask her—yes, tell her that the king's feast is of no importance to me, that I want her to come here right away, that—that—"

Sabartés held up one hand for silence. He spoke into the telephone, and listened a moment, and looked up again.

"She says the feast is in honor of her son, who has arrived in Uruk this day."

"Her *son?* What son?" Picasso's eyes were blazing. "She said nothing about a son! How old is he? What is this son's name? Who is his father? Ask her, Sabartés! Ask her!"

Sabartés spoke with her once again. "His name is Gilgamesh," he reported after a little while. "She has not seen him since her days on Earth, which were so long ago. I think you ought not to ask her to refuse the king's invitation, Pablo. I think you ought not to refuse it yourself."

"Gilgamesh?" Picasso said, wonderstruck. *"Gilgamesh?"*

Motorized chariots painted in many gaudy colors conveyed them the short distance from the lodging-hall to the feasting-place of the king, on the far side of the temple plaza. The building startled Gilgamesh, for it was not remotely Sumerian in form: a great soaring thing of ash-gray stone, it was, with a pair of narrow spires rising higher than any of Pompeii, and pointed arches over the heavy bronze doors, and enormous windows of stained glass in every color of the rainbow and a few other hues besides. Ghastly monsters of stone were mounted all along its facade. Some of them seemed slowly to be moving. It was very grand and immense and massive, but somehow also it seemed flimsy, and Gilgamesh wondered how it kept from falling down, until he saw the huge stone buttresses flying outward on the sides. Trust Dumuzi to build a palace for himself that needed to be propped up by such desperate improvisations, Gilgamesh thought. He loathed the look of it. It clashed miserably with the classic Uruk style of the buildings that surrounded it. If I am ever king of this city again, Gilgamesh vowed, I will rip down this dismal pile of stone as my first official act.

Herod, though, seemed to admire it. "It's a perfect replica of a Gothic cathedral," he told Gilgamesh as they went inside. "Perhaps Notre Dame, perhaps Chartres. I'm not sure which. I'm starting to forget some of what

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I once learned about architecture. I had some instruction in it, you know, from a man named Speer, a German, who passed through Pompeii a while back and did a little work for Sulla—peculiar chap, kept asking me if I wanted him to build a synagogue for me—what use would we have for a synagogue in Hell?—but he knew his stuff, he taught me all sorts of things about New Dead architectural design—you'd be astounded, Gilgamesh, what kinds of buildings they—"

"Can you try being quiet for a little while?" Gilgamesh asked.

The interior of the building actually had a sort of beauty, he thought. Paradise was still glowing ruddily in the sky at this hour, and its subtle light, entering through the stained-glass windows, gave the cavernous open spaces of the palace a solemn, mysterious look. And the upper reaches of the building, gallery upon gallery rising toward a dimly visible pointed-arch ceiling, were breathtaking in their loftiness. Still, there was something oppressive and sinister about it all. Gilgamesh much preferred the temple in honor of Enlil that he had built, and still well remembered, atop the White Platform in the center of the original Uruk. *That* had had grandeur. *That* had had dignity. These New Dead understood nothing about beauty.

Dumuzi's sycophants escorted them to the other end of the palace, where the building terminated in a great rounded chamber, open on one side and walled with stained glass on the other. A feasting-table had been set up there and dozens of guests had already gathered.

Gilgamesh saw Dumuzi at once, sumptuously robed, standing at the head of an enormous stone table.

He had not changed at all. He carried himself well, with true kingly bearing: a vigorous-looking man, heavy-bearded, with thick flowing hair so dark it seemed almost blue. But his lips were too full, his cheeks were too soft; and his eyes were small, and seemed both crafty and dull at the same time. He looked weak, unpleasant, untrustworthy, mean-souled.

Yet as he spied Gilgamesh he came down from his high place as though it were Gilgamesh and not he who was the king, and went to his side, and looked up at him, craning his neck in an awkward way—it was impossible for him to hide the discomfort that Gilgamesh's great height caused him—and hailed him in ringing tones, as he might a brother newly returned after a long sojourn abroad:

"Gilgamesh at last! Here in our Uruk! Hail, Gilgamesh, hail!"

"Dumuzi, hail," said Gilgamesh with all the enthusiasm he could find, and made a sign to him that one would have made to a king in Sumer the Land. "Great king, king of kings." He detected a quick flash of surprise in Dumuzi at that: plainly Dumuzi was not expecting much in the way of subservience out of him. Nor would he get much, Gilgamesh

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thought; but Dumuzi was king in this city, and proper courtesy was due a king, any king. Even Dumuzi.

"Come," Dumuzi said, "introduce me to your friends, and then you must sit beside me in the place of honor, and tell me of everything that has befallen you in Hell, the cities you've visited, the kings you've known, the things you've done. I want to hear all the news—we are so isolated, out here between the desert and the sea—but wait, wait, there are people here you must meet—"

Forgetting all about Sulla and Herod, who were left behind gaping indignantly, Dumuzi thrust his arm through Gilgamesh's and led him with almost hysterical eagerness toward the feasting-table. It was all Gilgamesh could do to keep from knocking him sprawling for the impertinence of this offensive overfamiliarity. He is a king, Gilgamesh reminded himself. He is a king.

And the desperate bluster behind Dumuzi's effusive cordiality was easy enough for Gilgamesh to see. The man was frightened. The man was scrambling frantically to gain control of a situation that must be immensely threatening to him.

For thousands of years Dumuzi had had the leisure in Hell to reflect on the shameful truth that he had been, in his earlier life, the feckless irresolute interpolation between the two great royal heroes Lugalbanda and Gilgamesh, a mere hyphen of history. Now he was king again, having risen by some mysterious law of incompetence to his former summit. And now here was that same hulking Gilgamesh for whose sake he had been thrust aside once before, materializing like an unwelcome spectre in New Uruk to claim his hospitality.

Of course Dumuzi would be cordial, and effusively so. But all the same it was likely to be a good idea, Gilgamesh thought, to guard his back at all times while in Dumuzi's city. Cowards are more dangerous than heroes, for they strike without fair warning; Dumuzi, tremulous and resentful, might work more harm than Achilles in all his wrath could ever manage.

A moment later these gloomy ruminations went completely from his mind; for a voice he had not heard in more centuries than he could count, but which was so different from any other man's that not even in Hell could it ever be forgotten, came pealing across the room, calling his name.

"Gilgamesh! Gilgamesh! By the Mother, it is truly you! By the Tusk! By the Horns of God! Gilgamesh, here!"

Gilgamesh stared. A man seated near the head of the banquet table had risen and held his arms wide outspread in a gesture of greeting.

Gilgamesh's first thought was that he must be New Dead, for alone in this great hall this man wore the strange formal costume of the most recent arrivals in Hell, what they called a business suit: tight gray

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pantaloons that hugged his legs, and a stiff-looking wide-shouldered half-length coat, not exactly a tunic, of the same close-woven gray woolen material, with a white vestment under it, and a narrow strip of blue cloth knotted about his throat and dangling down his chest. He was tall, too, as New Dead often were—taller by far than any of the Sumerians in the room but for Gilgamesh himself.

Yet there could be no mistaking that voice. It was a voice that came from the dawn of time, from the lost world that had been before the Flood, and it rang through the great room like a brazen trumpet, hard and clear. No New Dead had ever had a voice like that.

Nor was his lean face that of a New Dead, clean-shaven though it was. His skin had the burnished gleam of one who has faced the winds and snows of a world without warmth. His cheekbones were broad and strong, his lips were full, his nose was straight and very prominent, his mouth was extraordinarily wide. His eyes were wide-set too, far apart in his forehead, and one of them was missing from its socket: an ancient scar slashed crosswise over the left side of his face.

This man had been king of the cave-dwelling Ice-Hunter people, in that time before time when even the gods were young; and there had been a time in Hell when Gilgamesh had known him well.

Gilgamesh felt a chill of astonishment. How long had it been, he wondered, since they had enjoyed high merriment together in the great windy hall of the Ice-Hunter folk on the northern reaches of Hell—that vast cavern hung with woolly beast-skins where the huge curving tusks of the hairy elephants were scattered like straws on the floor, and the thick mead flowed in rivers, and the smoky fires burned high? A thousand Hellish years? Three thousand? It had been in his earliest days in Hell, that simpler, easier time that now seemed forever lost.

"Vy-otin!" Gilgamesh cried. With a whoop he rushed forward, mounting the dais on which the stone feasting-table sat, holding out his arms in a lusty embrace.

"So you have not forgotten," the Ice-Hunter said. "I thought for a moment you had."

"No, by the breasts of Inanna, how could I ever forget you! The old memories are brighter than anything after. Last year is hazy for me, but those old times, Vy-otin, you and I and Enkidu, and Minos, and Agamemnon—"

"Ah, but you looked doubtful a moment, Gilgamesh."

"You confused me with these New Dead clothes of yours," said Gilgamesh reproachfully. "You, who lived when the world was new, when the great shaggy beasts roamed, when Sumer itself was nothing but a muddy marsh—you, decking yourself out like some tawdry twentieth-century creature, someone out of—what do they call it, *A.D.?*" He made

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

it sound like an obscenity. "I remember a man in fur robes, Vy-otin, and a necklace of boar's teeth around his throat, and armlets of shining bone, not this—this *businessman* costume!"

Vy-otin said, laughing, "It's a long story, Gilgamesh. And I go by the name of Smith now, not Vy-otin. In this hall you can call me by my true name. But in the streets of Uruk my name is Smith."

"Smith?"

"Henry Smith, yes."

"Is that a New Dead name? How ugly it is!"

"It is a name that no one can remember as long as five minutes, not even me. Henry Smith. Sit with me, and we'll share a flask or two of this wine of Dumuzi's, and I'll tell you why I dress this way, and why my name is Smith now."

"I pray you, Vy-otin, let your story wait a while," said Dumuzi, who had been standing to one side. "There is someone else to whom Gilgamesh owes greetings, first—"

He touched Gilgamesh by the elbow, and nodded toward the other side of the table. A woman had risen there, a magnificent dark-haired woman of splendid stature and regal bearing, who stood calmly smiling at him.

She was a wondrous creature, radiant, beautiful, with shining eyes and the poise of a goddess. It was as if light emanated from her. Plainly, by the look of her and by her dress, she was Sumerian. She wore the robe of a priestess of An the Sky-father. She was within a year or two of Gilgamesh's age, so it seemed, or perhaps a little younger than that. Her face was familiar, though he could not place it. From her size and majesty she seemed surely to be of royal stock, and her features led him to think she might even be his own kinswoman. Some daughter of his, perhaps? He had had so many, though. Or the daughter of his daughter's daughter to the tenth generation, for here in Uruk as everywhere else in Hell there were folk of every era living jumbled all together, and one might meet one's own remote kin at every turning, distant ancestors who seemed to be mere boys, and one's children's children who looked to be in their dotage—

Dumuzi said, "Will you not go to her and show your respect, Gilgamesh?"

"Of course I will. But—"

"You hesitate?"

"I almost know her, Dumuzi. But the name slips from my tongue, and it shames me not to recall it."

"Well it should shame you, Gilgamesh, to forget your own mother!"

"My *mother?*" said Gilgamesh, with a gasp.

"The great queen Ninsun, and none other. Are you addled, man? Go to her! Go to her!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Gilgamesh looked toward her in wonder and awe. Of course it was plain now. Of course. The years fell away as though they had never been, and he saw his mother's face, the unmistakable features of the goddess-like wife of Lugalbanda, king of Uruk, that great woman who had brought the hero Gilgamesh into the world.

But yet—yet—

What tricks Hell plays on us, he thought. Never once had her path crossed his in the hundred lifetimes of his second life. He had not seen his mother since the days of that other world long gone; and he remembered her as she had been in her latter years, still majestic, still regal, but her hair white as the sands, her face lined and seamed; and now here she was in full robust beauty again, not youthful but far from old, a woman in glorious prime. He had been only a child when last she had looked like that. No wonder he had not recognized her.

He hastened to her now, and dropped down on his knees before her, taking the hem of her robe and putting it to his lips. The thousands of years of his wanderings in this vile harsh land became as nothing; he was a boy again, in his first life, and the goddess his mother was restored to him and stood before him, agleam with warmth and love.

Softly she said his secret name, his birth-name, that no one but she was permitted to utter. Then she told him to rise, and he came to his full height, folding her against his bosom: for, tall as she was, she was like a child beside him. After a time he released her and she stepped back to look at him.

"I despaired of ever seeing you again," she said. "In all the places I have lived in Hell I have heard tales of great Gilgamesh, and never once, never ever, have I been where you have been. I saw Enkidu once, from a distance, in a great noisy mob: that was in New Albion, I think, or the Realm of Logres, or perhaps the place they call Phlegethon. I forget, now. But we were swept apart before I could call to him. And when I asked of Gilgamesh in that place, no one there knew anything of him."

"Mother—"

"And then I came to this new Uruk, knowing you had been king here, and thinking you might still hold your throne—but no, no, they said you had taken your leave of this city long ago, that you had gone hunting with Enkidu and never returned, more years ago than anyone could remember. And I thought, very well, the gods have no wish to let me see my son again, for this is Hell and few wishes are granted here. But then the word came that you were approaching the city. Oh, Gilgamesh! What joy it is to behold you again!"

"And my father?" Gilgamesh asked. "What of the divine Lugalbanda? Surely he must not be here, for he is a god, and how can there be gods in Hell? But do you know anything of him?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ninsun's eyes clouded a moment. "He is here too, of that I am certain. For those who were made gods after their lives in Sumer are gods no longer, and dwell in Hell. You elevated me to godhood, Gilgamesh, do you remember?"

"Yes," he said, only a murmur.

"And you yourself—they ranked you with the gods also. It makes no difference. Those who lived as mortals die as mortals, and come to this place."

"You know with certainty that Lugalbanda is here, then?"

"I think he is. Of him I have heard not one word in all the time I have been here. But some day he and I will find one another again, that I know."

"Yes," Gilgamesh said once more, nodding. It had never occurred to him that his father might indeed be somewhere in Hell, and the possibility aroused excitement and amazement in his breast. "In Hell all things happen, sooner or later. You will be reunited with the king your husband and live by his side as the Sky-father ordained, for you and he were mated for all time and this span in Hell has been but a brief separation; and I—"

An odd look came then into Ninsun's face. For an instant she lowered her eyes, as though abashed. The queenly splendor, the goddess-glow, went from her, and for that instant she seemed to be only a mere mortal woman.

"Have I spoken amiss?" Gilgamesh asked.

She said, "You have said nothing that should not have been said. But I would have you meet my friend, Gilgamesh."

"Your—friend—?"

Color rose to her cheeks in a curiously girlish way that he was altogether unable to associate with his memories of the regal presence of his mother. She nodded toward an elderly man sitting beside her, who got now to his feet.

Standing, he was less than breast-high to Gilgamesh, a short balding man, *very* short, not so tall by half a head as Ninsun herself; and yet as Gilgamesh looked more closely he saw that there was a strange elemental force about this man, a look of enormous power and commanding strength, that made him seem not nearly as short as he actually was, made him look, indeed, kingly in size and stance. It was the depth and breadth of his shoulders and torso that gave him that potent look, Gilgamesh thought: that and his eyes, which were the most intense that the Sumerian had ever seen, more penetrating, even, than those of Imbe Calandola the mage. Astonishing eyes they were, dark and glittering, the eyes of a hawk, the eyes of an eagle—no, the eyes of a god, merciless eyes, all-seeing eyes. They blazed like black jewels in his face.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Gilgamesh realized abruptly that this strange and powerful little man must be his mother's lover; and it was a disturbing thought indeed.

Hard enough to find her transformed into a young woman again, beautiful and for all he knew lusty; but harder still to think of her with a woman's earthy nature, seeking a man's bed, this man's bed, this old man, this man who had no hair, his arms about her, his fingers probing the secret places of her body that only Lugalbanda the king had known—

Fool, he thought. She is your mother, but she is also a woman, and was a woman before she was your mother. She has not seen Lugalbanda for five thousand years, and all vows are canceled in this place. Did you think she would remain chaste for the whole five thousand years of her life in Hell? Do you think she should?

Still, why this man?—this old man, so short, not even any hair on his head, his leathery skin deeply folded, lined—

"I am called Ruiz," the little man said. "She is your mother? Good. You are a fitting son. She should be the mother of giants, this woman. The mother of gods, eh? And you are the famous Gilgamesh. *Mucho gusto en conocerlo*, Señor Gilgamesh." Ruiz grinned and put out his hand, casually, confidently, as though they were equals, standing eye to eye, one giant to another. He was the biggest little man Gilgamesh had ever known.

Gilgamesh began to understand why his mother had chosen this man; or rather, why she had allowed herself to be chosen by him. He was like an irresistible force, a river running unstoppably toward the sea.

"Pablo is an artist," Ninsun said. "A painter, a man of pictures. He is making a picture of me." With a little laugh she said, "He will not let me look at it. But I know it will be a very great picture."

"There are difficulties," Ruiz said. "But I will conquer them. Your mother is extraordinary—her face, her presence—I will make such a painting of her as the Devil himself will want to buy. Only I will not sell it to him. And then, after her, you, eh, Gilgamesh?"

"Me?"

"To pose. I will put a mask on you, the head of a bull, and you will be my Minotaur. The finest Minotaur ever, the true man-monster, the creature of the Labyrinth. Eh? Eh? What do you say, Gilgamesh? I like you. You know, this Sunday, *el domingo que viene*, there will be a bullfight in Uruk. You know the bullfight, eh? *¿La corrida*? You know what it is, to fight with bulls?"

"I know what that is, yes," said Gilgamesh.

"Good. Of course. You will sit with me that day. We will observe the fine points, you and I. You like that? The seat of honor, beside me." The little man's amazing eyes gleamed. "And tomorrow you come to me and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

we begin to plan the posing, eh? We must begin at once. I will make you great with my painting."

"He is great already," said Ninsun quietly.

"*¡Por supuesto!* Of course. He is a king, he is a legend, we all know that. But there is greatness and greatness, eh, Gilgamesh? You will be my Minotaur. You know? The son of Minos, but not really Minos's son, but *en realidad* the son of the bull, who I think was Poseidon. Eh? You will pose for me?"

It was only barely a question. This man, Gilgamesh saw, did not regard his questions as questions, but as commands. The curious urgency of his desire to paint him was amusing, and, in its way, compelling. A mere painter, an artisan, a dauber on walls, was all he was, and yet he seemed to think that making a painting of Gilgamesh wearing a bull-mask was a matter of the most supreme importance. Maybe it was. It mattered at least as much as anything else here. To his surprise Gilgamesh found himself liking this little man, and even respecting him. And not even resenting him for having taken possession of Ninsun as apparently he had. He felt an affinity with him that he had felt for very few of the New Dead. This Ruiz was like someone out of a much older time, when the distinctions between gods and men were not as great as they later became. He had about him a demigod's nature. It took only a single glance to see that.

"Yes," Gilgamesh said. "I will pose for you, Ruiz. I will come to you tomorrow, yes."

Dumuzi said then, "To your seats, everyone! It is time for the wine! It is time for the meat!"

They had drunk the night away. Sulla was asleep in his seat, snoring. He had been bored and restless throughout the feast, feeling neglected and out of place. Herod sat slouched over a flask of golden wine, the same one he had nursed half the evening; he looked to be frayed and weary, at the last edge of his endurance, but he seemed determined to hang on. He was talking earnestly with a lean, dark, heavily-bearded man in a flowing white robe. Dumuzi, puffy-eyed and pale, was also clearly making an effort at staying awake, though his head was nodding. Across the way, Ninsun looked tired but game, and little Ruiz beside her showed no sign of fatigue whatever; his eyes were keen and gleaming still, and he was scrawling drawings by the dozen on the table napery, on dirty plates, on any flat surface that came to hand.

Vy-otin, still impeccable in his crisp and no doubt miserably uncomfortable New Dead clothes, came to Gilgamesh's side and said quietly, "Come, let us go for a little walk. The air is fresher outside, and I have things to tell you. Some advice for you, perhaps."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yes," Gilgamesh said. "Of course."

Rising, he bowed to Dumuzi—how costly that was to his spirit, bowing to Dumuzi!—and asked to be excused. The king feebly waved his hand. Gilgamesh and the Ice-Hunter chieftain went down the long high-vaulted aisle of the feasting-hall toward the distant doorway.

By early morning light everything had a red glow. Paradise hung low in the sky, as though it meant to touch the tips of Hell's mountains before noon.

Gilgamesh said, "How peaceful it is at this hour. Even in Hell, one finds peace now and then."

Vy-otin's wind-tanned face turned stern. His single eye was bright and fierce. "Peace? The only peace you'll find in Uruk is the peace of death. Get yourself out of this city, old friend, as quickly as you can."

"I have only just arrived, Vy-otin. It would be discourteous to leave so soon."

"Stay, then. But only if you're weary of your present life."

"Am I in danger, do you think?"

"Tell me this, and what you tell me will be secret, by our ancient oaths of loyalty: Have you come to Uruk to regain its throne, Gilgamesh?"

The Sumerian halted abruptly. "Do you think that's why I'm here?"

"Dumuzi does."

"Ah, does he? He was ever full of fear."

"And he will have you killed if you remain here," said Vy-otin.

"He will try to, yes. I would expect that of him. He won't find killing me that easy."

"He is king in this city, Gilgamesh."

"And I am Gilgamesh. I will stay as long as I please. No one of Sumerian blood will dare raise a hand against me."

"Not everyone in Uruk is Sumerian," Vy-otin said. "No more than one out of ten, perhaps. There are plenty here who'd like the glory of slaying the famous Gilgamesh. Dumuzi won't lack for assassins."

"Let them come. I can defend myself."

"Indeed. But it's true, then, that you are here to take his throne from him?"

"No!" cried Gilgamesh angrily. "Why does everyone assume that? I don't want his throne or any other. Believe me. I lost my appetite for power a long time ago, Vy-otin. That is the absolute truth. Believe me. Trust me in this. Trust me."

"That is three or four times in one breath that you ask me to believe you," Vy-otin said. "It has always seemed to me that only a man who doubts his own words would ask so passionately to be believed."

Gilgamesh, stung, gave the Ice-Hunter a furious glare. "You believe I'm lying to you, then?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I think you may be lying to yourself."

"Ah," Gilgamesh said. His hands trembled. He felt rage surging up and down his body—and subsiding. For a long moment he was silent. "Anyone else, Vy-otin, and I would have struck him down for those words. But not you. Not you." He grew quiet again; and then in a very low voice he said, "I will tell you the truth: I no longer know my own soul. I say to myself that I shun power, that I loathe ambition, that I have only scorn for those who scramble for preferment in the land of Hell. And yet—and yet—lately, Vy-otin, there are times when I feel the old fires rising, when I see that I am not as different from other men as I like to think, that I too am driven by that vain urge to clamber to the top of the mountain—" He shook his head. "The truth is I am not at all sure of my own purposes any longer. Perhaps Dumuzi does have something to fear from me after all. But I tell you this, Vy-otin, that I had another reason beside seizing the throne for coming to Uruk."

"Which was?"

"I learned from a sorcerer in the city of Pompeii that Enkidu might be here, my dearest friend, the brother of my soul, from whom I have been apart far too long."

"I remember Enkidu, yes. The great hairy roistering man, like a wild bull."

"I came here to find him. Nothing more than that. That is the truth. I swear to you, that is the truth as I believe it."

"Do you have any certain knowledge that he is in Uruk?"

"Only a vision, inspired in me by the wizardry of a black mage. But I think it is a sure vision."

"I wish you joy of the search, then, and all good fortune," said Vy-otin, seizing both of Gilgamesh's hands in his. "By the Horns of God, I will help you in any way I can! But be careful in this city, Gilgamesh. Dumuzi is sly and slippery, and he hates you more than you can imagine. He would send you to Hell a thousand times over if you were not already here."

"I will be wary of him," Gilgamesh said. "I know Dumuzi's ways from the other world."

They walked on for a long while, neither of them speaking. The glow of Paradise deepened and climbed and the morning air grew warm. The houses and shops of Uruk began to come to life.

After a time Gilgamesh said, "You have not told me, friend, why you wear this absurd garb of yours."

"I have come to like it," said Vy-otin.

"Perhaps so. But it is an odd costume for one who was born at the beginning of time."

"Do I seem that old to you, Gilgamesh? Think of the Hairy Men, who

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

look so near to apes. *They* are truly ancient. Who knows when they lived? It must have been long ago, for they are nothing like us, though they tell us they are our cousins. My time was only ten thousand years before yours. Or perhaps fifteen. I am a man like you."

"Ten thousand years is not a sneeze, Vy-otin. Your time was much before mine. About the Hairy Men I cannot tell you. But you come from a world I never knew, and it was very long before mine. Why, you lived before the Flood!"

"So you like to say." Vy-otin shrugged. "Perhaps so. I know nothing of your Flood. In my time the world was deep in ice. The sun was bright, the air was cool, the wind cut like a knife. The huge shaggy beasts roamed the land. It was the grandest of times, Gilgamesh. There were just a few of us, you know, but we were magnificent! You should have seen us, running to the hunt, moving between the dark leafless trees like ghosts! By the Horns, I wish you had been there with us! I wish I were still there now."

"You had made it all live again in your palace in the north," said Gilgamesh. "With the great tusks on the floor, and the furry skins on the walls, and your people gathered around you. Why did you leave that place?"

"You were king in this very city. Why did *you* leave?"

"How can I say? We move about in Hell without understanding anything. Perhaps I was slain, and awoke somewhere else, New Hell, perhaps, or some other city far away. I have no memory of that. The memory has been stolen from me."

"Not from me," said Vy-otin. "I was killed. A stupid brawl, some drunken Egyptians—I made the mistake of getting between them. I went to Reassignment and was gone a thousand years, or maybe two, and when I came back I was somewhere else far from any place I knew. Do you know the city of Dis, Gilgamesh?"

"Dis? No."

"On the far side of the Western Sea."

"I thought there was nothing on the far side."

"Hell is infinite, friend. I lived in Dis a long while, and then I crossed the sea, and now I live in Uruk. My people are scattered and no one remembers the palace in the north. Everything changes, Gilgamesh, and not for the better."

"And you decided to dress as New Dead in the city Dis, is that it? Why?"

"So they wouldn't know I was prehistoric. For that is what they call me, *prehistoric*, as though I were some kind of animal."

"They? Who?"

"The scholars," Vy-otin said. "The philosophers. The archaeologists.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The dull prying boring New Dead folk. Let me tell you what happened, Gilgamesh. In Dis I fell in with a man of the New Dead, short and ugly, but strong, very strong, a musician: Wagner was his name. And his friend, who was called Nietzsche, if you can think of that as a name, and another one, a Jew like your Herod, but older, with a white beard. He was named Freud. We sat up drinking all night, the four of us, just as you and I have done here tonight, and when dawn came they asked me my name and I told them that it was Vy-otin, and that I was of the old Ice-Hunter folk, that I had lived in a cavern during the cold times and lost my eye in a battle with a tiger of the snows. And I told them a thing or two more of how my life had been. Suddenly this Wagner cried out, 'Wotan! You are Wotan!' And Nietzsche said, 'Yes, the very man.' And old Freud began to laugh, and said that it was quite possible, that there could be no question that myth had roots in reality and that I might well be the myth in the flesh."

"I have trouble understanding all this," said Gilgamesh.

"This Wotan, who also is called Odin, was a god, long after your time and mine, a one-eyed god of the cold northern lands. Those three, they were convinced that I was the original of this Odin, this Wotan, do you see? That I had become a legend, the wise one-eyed king of the snow-country, and over thousands of years the people of the north had come to worship me as the father of the gods."

"And if that is so? What is that to you?"

"Only that those three foolish men were dancing with joy, to know that they had the archetype of a great myth right there at the table with them. I said I am who I am, and they brushed me aside. Who I was was of no importance to them. They thought I was quaint, a primitive, a savage. A beast. I think they were amazed that I was capable of speech at all. It was what they wanted me to be that excited them: the archetype. That was what they called me, the archetype. I asked them what an archetype was and they spent hours explaining it to me, when one word would have done. It means the original. I am the original Wotan, if you would believe those three. All the great myths, they said, come down out of the prehistoric dawn of mankind, and here was a man out of that dawn sitting right there with them in the tavern, and it made them delirious with a fever of the mind. *Wotan!* Wagner cried, and he wanted to know if I had had any daughters. Freud, though, asked if I had sons. And Nietzsche wanted to know if I believed in God. Ah, those three, Gilgamesh! One had written operas about Wotan—you know what an opera is? Singing and noise, and costumes—and one had written philosophy, and the third one claimed to know more about the way of life in my times than I knew myself. They each saw their own reflections in me. And they asked me ten thousand thousand questions, and called others to see me,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

scientists and thinkers, and made such a fuss and a bother that I would have given them my other eye to let me alone. By the Mother, they drove me crazy! I fled from them finally. I am no god, Gilgamesh, and I am no archetype. I am only a simple man of the Pleistocene, and—"

"The what?"

"It is what the scholars call the epoch when I lived. When ice covered everything and the shaggy animals lived." Vy-otin laughed. "*Pleistocene.* You see? Their silly words infect me. *Prehistoric.* Do you think we thought of ourselves as prehistoric men? Mere grunting beast-men? That was not what we were. We had poetry. We had music. We had gods. *Aurignacians,* that is their name for us. It means nothing to me, that name. *Archetype.*" Vy-otin shook his head. "I fled, and I hid from them. And now I call myself Henry Smith, and I pretend I am New Dead, so that the scholars can't annoy me any longer—the deep thinkers, the philosophers who would tell me what I am. Let them study someone else. Let someone else be prehistoric for them. Let someone else be an Aurignacian archetype."

"You don't *look* New Dead, Vy-otin."

"No?"

Gilgamesh smiled. "Not to me. To me you look like a one-eyed Ice-Hunter chieftain dressed up in New Dead clothing. A barbarian just like me. You look Pleistocene. You look—what is it?—Aurignacian. Definitely an Aurignacian. You look like an archetype, Vy-otin."

Vy-otin smiled also, but without much warmth. "Be that as it may," said the Ice-Hunter, sounding a little testy. "I will not play their game. And woe betide you, my friend, if you find yourself some day among a pack of philosophers. They'll give you no peace; and by the time they're done with you you won't be sure of your own name."

"Perhaps so," said Gilgamesh. "In the Outback once I met a poor crazy man of the New Dead who mistook me for a Cimmerian, one Conan by name, and wanted to worship me, or worse. What a sad fool he was! It was more of that archetype business, I think."

"They are all such fools, these modern men," Vy-otin said.

"But foolishness was not invented yesterday," said Gilgamesh. "We had our share of it in my time. Possibly so did you."

"Indeed," said Vy-otin.

Gilgamesh stared thoughtfully at his old friend, and suddenly found himself wondering about his own gods, Sky-father An and Enlil of the storms and Enki the compassionate and all the rest. Had they once been men themselves, and been turned by time and human gullibility into archetypes? If he wandered Hell long enough, would he find the originals of the gods of Sumer the Land gathered in some tavern in the City of Dis, telling each other tales of the good times before the Flood?

It was not something that he cared to think about.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In silence once more they walked back toward the feasting-hall.

Gilgamesh said, "So that was the advice you had for me? That I should keep away from philosophers?"

"That, and being on your guard against Dumuzi."

"Yes. Yes, that too. But I should fear the philosophers more, if your experience is to be any guide. Swords and daggers I can handle. But buzzing men of words? Pah! They madden me!" He saw Herod now, coming out of the feasting-hall looking much the worse for his night's carouse. The little Judaean leaned woozily against the intricate reliefs of the hall's dark façade and drew breath again and again, and rubbed his eyes, and ran the back of his hand across his lips. His white Sumerian robe was stained with wine, his skullcap was askew. "Do you see that one?" Gilgamesh asked. "He traveled with me from Pompeii. Words, all words! Give him an ear and he'll buzz at you for hours. No more courage than a flea. And yet he claims he was a king once too."

"Gilgamesh?" Herod called, shading his eyes in the glare. "There you are, Gilgamesh!" Walking in an uncertain way, as if he expected his ankles to give way at any moment, he came toward the Sumerian and said, "Been looking for you. Can I talk with you?"

"Go on."

Herod glanced uneasily at Vy-otin. He said nothing.

"What is it?" Gilgamesh said.

Herod said, still uneasy, "I've managed to pick up some information this night. A few things that ought to interest you."

"Speak, then."

"Your mother's friend? The man who wants to paint you?"

With mounting impatience Gilgamesh said, "What about him?"

"He goes by the name of Ruiz here. But do you know who he really is, Gilgamesh? He's *Picasso!*"

"Who?"

"Picasso. Pablo Picasso!" Herod, bloodshot and stubble-faced as he was, seemed almost apoplectically animated. "He's hiding from some ex-wife or ex-girlfriend, that's why he's going under another name. But one of Dumuzi's courtiers told me who he actually is. Isn't that fantastic? Of course you'll let him paint you, won't you? He'll turn you into a masterpiece the likes of which Hell has never—" Herod paused. "You aren't impressed. No, you aren't, not at all. You don't even know who Picasso is, do you? Only the greatest New Dead artist who ever lived! I've studied these things, you know. New Dead art, music, architecture—"

"Is it not as I told you?" Gilgamesh said to Vy-otin. "An endless buzzing. A torrent of words."

"All right, you don't care," said Herod sulkily. "Let him paint you

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

anyway. I thought you'd be glad to know who he was. But that wasn't the most important thing I wanted to tell you."

"Of course not. You save what is important for last. How considerate. Well, speak, now!"

But again Herod was still, and looked uncertainly toward Vy-otin.

"This man is my dear friend and brother Henry Smith," said Gilgamesh. "I have no secrets from him. Speak, Herod, or by Enlil I'll hurl you as far as—"

"Enkidu is in Uruk," Herod blurted hastily.

"What?"

"The big rough-looking man, the one you seek. Your friend, the one you call your brother. Isn't that Enkidu?"

"Yes, yes!"

"The courtier told me—an Assyrian, he is, name of Tukulti-Sharrukin, very drunk. Enkidu appeared here last week, straight from Reassignment—perhaps the week before, who can tell? Anyway, he showed up in Uruk and went right to the palace, because he had heard a rumor you were here, or had had a dream, or—well, whatever. He thought you might be at the palace. But of course you weren't. He kept asking, Where is Gilgamesh, where is Gilgamesh? He should be here. Dumuzi became very upset. He didn't like the idea that you might be anywhere in the vicinity."

Gilgamesh felt a thundering of excitement within his breast. "And where is Enkidu now?"

"The Assyrian wasn't sure. Still here somewhere. A prisoner somewhere in Uruk, that's what he thinks. He promised to find out for me and let me know tomorrow."

"A prisoner?" Gilgamesh said.

"By the Tusk!" Vy-otin bellowed. "We'll find him! We'll free him! By the Mother! By the Horns of God! A prisoner? Enkidu? We'll tear down the walls of the place where he's kept!"

"Gently," Gilgamesh said, putting a hand to Vy-otin's shoulder. "Stay calm. There are ways and ways to go about this, Vy-otin, my friend."

"You said his name was Henry Smith," said Herod softly.

"Never mind that," Gilgamesh snapped. To the Ice-Hunter he said, "Haste would be wrong. First we must find out if Enkidu is truly here, and where he is, and who guards him. Then we approach Dumuzi, carefully, carefully. He is a weak man. You know how one must deal with weak men, Vy-otin. Firmly, directly, taking care not to send them into panic, for then they might do anything. If he slays Enkidu out of fear of me I could be another thousand years finding him again. So we must move slowly. Eh, Vy-otin? What do you say?"

"I think you are right," the Ice-Hunter said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Gilgamesh turned to Herod. A pitiful little man, he thought. But a clever and a useful one.

"A good night's work," he said, smiling warmly. "Well done, King Herod! Well done!"

"This will be your mask," Picasso said. "Here. Here, put it on."

He moved about the big, ugly underground room like some chugging little machine, rearranging the heaps of clutter, kicking things out of his way, pushing them aside. Gilgamesh looked at the mask that had been thrust into his hands, puzzled. It was as ugly as everything else in this room: a massive bull-snout of papier-mâché, with huge black nostrils and great jutting square teeth. There was one staring red eye along the left side and another on top, and short sharp curved horns made of wax protruded at peculiar angles. Clumps of thick crinkly black fur were glued to it everywhere. A sour smell rose from the thing. He was supposed to fasten it, apparently, by tying the cord that dangled from it around his throat.

"You want me to wear *this?"* Gilgamesh asked.

"Of course. Put it on, put it on! You will be my Minotaur!" Picasso waved his hands impatiently. "I made it *today*, especially for you."

Only a day had gone by since Dumuzi's feast. The mask, hideous though it was, was highly elaborate, surely the product of many days of work. "How is that possible?" Gilgamesh said. "That you could have made this so quickly?"

"Quickly?" Picasso spat. "*¡Cagarruta!* What do you mean, quickly? That mask took me more than an hour!"

"You are a sorcerer, then."

Picasso laughed, and went on clearing space in the studio.

Gilgamesh put the mask aside and wandered around the room, peering at the paintings stacked against every wall. They were horrifying. Here was a woman with two faces on one head, and it was impossible to tell whether she was looking straight at you or showing you the side of her head. Here was a picture that was all little boxes, that made your eyes jump around until you wanted to weep. Here were three monsters with mocking faces. Here, a woman with three breasts and teeth between her legs.

The shapes! The colors! No one had ever seen such scenes, not even in Hell. Surely there was some witchcraft being practiced here. In old Uruk, Gilgamesh thought, he would have ordered these paintings to be burned, and the painter to be driven from the city with whips. And yet he found himself beguiled despite himself by these works. He could sense the little man's powerful and playful mind behind them, and his formidable strength of will.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Are you a sorcerer?" Gilgamesh asked.

"*Por favor*. The mask. Put it on."

"A demon of some sort?"

"Yes," said Picasso. "I am a demon. The mask, will you?"

"Show me the picture you have made of my mother."

"It is not finished. It keeps changing. Everything keeps changing. I will put the mask on you myself." Picasso crossed the room and snatched it up. But he was too short; Gilgamesh rose above him like a wall. "*¡Dios!* What a *cojonudo* monster you are! Is there any need for you to be so big?" He shoved the mask upward toward Gilgamesh's chin. "Put it on," he said. "*Ahora a trabajar*. It is time for us to work now."

He said it quietly, but with great force. Gilgamesh slipped the mask over his face, nearly gagging at first at the stink of glue and other things. He tied it behind his neck. There were slits through which he could see, though not well. Picasso beckoned him to a place under the bright, intense electrical lights and showed him how he wanted him to stand, arms upraised as if ready to seize an onrushing enemy.

"All these other pictures, you have painted using models?" Gilgamesh said, his voice muffled and rumbling inside the mask. "They are things you have actually seen?"

"I see them in here," said Picasso, tapping his forehead. He lit a cigarette and stepped back, staring at Gilgamesh so unwaveringly that the power of that keen gaze felt like the pressure of knives against the Sumerian's skin. "Sometimes I use models, sometimes not. Lately more often than not, because of the difficulties. I tell myself that the models will help, though they do not, not very much. This place, this Hell, it is shit, you know? It is *mierda*, it is *cagada*, this whole place is *un gran cagadero*. But we do what we can, eh, King Gilgamesh? This is our life now. And it is better than the great darkness, the big *nada*, eh? Eh, king? Hold your arms up. The legs apart, a little. Thrust forward from the hips, as though you are going to stick it into her, eh, just as you stand there." He was painting already, swift broad strokes. Gilgamesh felt a quiver of uneasiness. What if this really was some kind of sorcery? What if Picasso could capture his soul and put it on that canvas, and meant to leave him locked up in it forever?

No, he told himself. Nonsense. The little man was just what he said he was, a painter. A very great painter, if Herod could be believed. There might be a demon inside him, but it was the same kind of demon that once had been in Gilgamesh, that had driven him onward to go everywhere, see everything, learn everything, devour everything. I understand this man, Gilgamesh thought. The difference is that in Hell I have grown quiet and easy, and this one still burns with the restlessness and the hunger.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You were always a painter?" Gilgamesh asked.

"Always. From the cradle. Don't talk now, eh?"

How casually he orders a king around, Gilgamesh thought. Just a little bald-headed man wearing only a pair of ragged baggy shorts, sweat running down the white hair of his chest, a cloud of cigarette smoke surrounding him, and he has no fear of anyone, of anything. It was not hard now to see how he had captured Ninsun. This man, Gilgamesh thought, could probably have any woman he wanted. Even a queen. Even a goddess.

"Do you know?" Picasso said, after a long while. "I think this time it will work. The painting holds. The others, they turned in my hand. This one holds. It is the charm of the Minotaur, I think. The bull rules in Hell! I am a bull. You are a bull. We are in the arena all the time. I could not become a matador, so I became a bull. The same with you, I think. It makes no difference: the power of the bull is in both. In your city, did they fight the bull?"

"I fought one once," Gilgamesh said. "Enkidu and I. It was the Bull of Heaven, with the power of Father Enlil in him. He was let loose in the city by the priestess Inanna, and ran wild and slew a child; but Enkidu and I, we caught him, we danced with him, we played him, we fought him down. Enkidu wearied him and I put the sword in him."

"Bravo!"

"But it angered the gods. They took Enkidu's life, by way of revenge. He wasted away and died. That was the first time I lost him; but I have lost him again and again here in Hell. I must search for him forever. It is our fate never to be together too long. That man is my brother; he is my other self. But I will find him again, and soon. They tell me he is in Uruk, a prisoner. You may have seen him, perhaps—he is as tall as I am, and—"

But Picasso did not seem to be listening any longer.

"The bullfight on Sunday," said Picasso. "How you will love it! We will sit together in the seat of honor, you and I. Sabartés has found a matador of whom I know nothing, but perhaps he will be good, eh? It is very important that the matador be good. Mere butchery, that is shameful. The *corrida* is art. Lift the arms, yes?"

He has not heard a word of what I said to him about Enkidu, thought Gilgamesh. His mind went elsewhere when I spoke of killing the Bull of Heaven. He hears only what he wants to hear. When he wants to hear, he listens, and when he wants to talk, he talks. But in his soul he is the only king. No matter, Gilgamesh thought. He is a great man. And Herod is probably right: he is a great painter. Even if all that he paints are monstrosities.

"It goes well," Picasso said. "The image holds true, you know? The

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

power of the bull. No cubism today, no blue, no rose." His arm was moving so quickly now that it seemed to be not a single arm but three. His eyes were ablaze. Yet he gave no appearance of haste. His face was fixed, still, expressionless. His body, but for that unceasing arm, seemed totally relaxed. Gilgamesh ached to see what was on that canvas.

The mask was hot and stifling now. The Sumerian felt that if he kept it on much longer he would choke. But he dared not move. He was caught in the little man's spell. Sorcery, yes, definitely sorcery, Gilgamesh thought.

"Do you know why I paint?" Picasso asked. "I say, each time, What can I learn of myself today that I don't know? The paintings teach me. When it isn't me any more who is talking, but the pictures I make, and when they escape and mock me, then I know I've achieved my goal. Do you know? Do you understand? No? Ah, it makes no difference. Here. Here, we can stop now. Enough for today. It goes well. *Por dios*, it goes well!"

Gilgamesh lost no time working himself free of the mask. He gasped for fresh air, but there was none. The room was heavy with the scent of sweat.

"Is it finished?" he asked. He had no idea how long he had posed, whether it was ten minutes or half a day.

"For now," said Picasso. "Here: look."

He swung the easel around. Gilgamesh stared.

What had he expected to see? The picture of a tall muscular man with a bull's hideous face, gaping mouth, swollen tongue, wild red eyes looking in different directions, the face that was on the mask. But there were two naked men in the picture, crouched face to face like wrestlers poised to spring. One was huge, black-bearded, with powerful commanding features. Gilgamesh recognized himself in that portrait immediately: it was a remarkable likeness. The other man was much shorter, stocky, wide-shouldered, deep-chested. Picasso himself, plainly. But his face could not be seen. It was the short man who was wearing the mask of the bull.

Three assassins were waiting for him when he stepped out into the Street of the Tanners and Dyers. Gilgamesh was neither surprised nor alarmed. They were so obviously lying in wait for him that he hardly needed them to draw their weapons to know what they were up to.

They were disguised, more or less, as Uruk police, in ill-fitting khaki uniforms badly stained below the arms with sweat. One, with a big blunt nose and a general reek of garlic about him, might have been a Hittite, and the other two were New Dead, with that strange yellow hair that some of them had, and pathetic straggly beards and mustaches. They had guns.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Gilgamesh wasted no time. He struck one of the New Dead across the throat with the edge of his hand and sent him reeling into a narrow alleyway, where he fell face forward and lay twitching and croaking and puking. On the backswing Gilgamesh rammed his elbow hard into the Hittite's conspicuous nose, and at the same time he caught the other New Dead by the wrist and twisted the pistol free of his grasp, kicking it across the street.

The New Dead yelped and took off at full speed, arms flailing wildly in the air. Gilgamesh drew his dagger and turned to the Hittite, who had both hands clapped to his face. Blood was pouring out between his fingers.

He touched the tip of his dagger to the Hittite's belly and said, "Who sent you?"

"You broke my nose!"

"Very likely. Next time don't push it into my elbow that way." The Sumerian said, with a little prod of the dagger, "Do you have a name?"

"Tudhaliyash."

"That's not a name, it's a belch. What are you, a Hittite?"

Tudhaliyash, looking miserable, nodded. The blood was flowing a little less copiously now.

"Who do you work for, Hittite?"

"The municipality of Uruk," said the man sullenly. "Department of Weights and Measures."

"Were you here to weigh me, or to measure me?"

"I was on my way to the tavern with my friends when you attacked us."

"Yes. I often attack strangers in the street, especially in groups of three. Who sent you after me?"

"It would be worth my life to say."

"It will be worth your life to keep silent," said Gilgamesh, prodding a little harder. "One shove of this and I'll send you on your way to Reassignment. But you won't get there quickly. It takes a long time to die of a slash in the guts."

"Ur-ninmarka sent me," the Hittite murmured.

"Who?"

"The royal arch-vizier."

"Ah. I remember. Dumuzi's right hand. And who were you supposed to kill?"

"G-G—G-Gil—"

"Say it."

"Gilgamesh."

"And who is he?"

"The former k-king."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Am I Gilgamesh?"

"Yes."

"I am the man you were told to kill?"

"Yes. Yes. Make it quick, Gilgamesh! In the heart, not the belly!"

"It wouldn't be worth the trouble of having to clean my blade of you afterward," said Gilgamesh. "I will be merciful. You'll live to belch some more."

"A *thousand* blessings! A *million* blessings!"

Gilgamesh scowled. "Enough. Get away from me. Show me how well you can run. Take your puking friend over there with you. I will forget this entire encounter. I remember nothing of you and I know nothing of who it was who sent you upon me. You didn't tell me a thing. You understand? Yes, I think you do. Go, now. Go!"

They ran very capably indeed. Gilgamesh leaned against the wall of Picasso's house and watched until they were out of sight. A nuisance, he thought, being waylaid in the street like that. Dumuzi should show more imagination. Persuade some demons to have the pavement swallow me up, or drop a cauldron of burning oil on me from the rooftops, or some such.

He looked around warily to see if anyone else lay in ambush for him. There was a faint ectoplasmic shimmer on the building across the way, as though some diabolic entity were passing through the walls, but there was nothing unusual about that. Otherwise all seemed well. Briskly Gilgamesh walked to the end of the street, turned left into a street calling itself the Street of Camels, and went onward via the Corridor of Sighs and the Place of Whispers to the great plaza where he was lodged.

Herod was there, bubbling with news.

"Your friend is indeed a prisoner in Uruk," he said at once. "We've found out where he's being kept."

Gilgamesh's eyes widened. "Where is he?" he demanded. "What have they done to him? Who told you?"

"Tukulti-Sharrukin's our source, the Assyrian courtier who likes to drink too much. Your friend is fine. The Assyrian says Enkidu hasn't been harmed in any way. He's being held at a place called the House of Dust and Darkness on the north side of the city. The House of Dust and Darkness! Isn't that a fine cheery name?"

"You idiot," Gilgamesh said, barely containing his anger.

Herod backed away in alarm. "What's wrong?"

"Your Assyrian is playing jokes with you, fool. Any man of the Two Rivers would know what The House of Dust and Darkness is. It's simply the name we used in the old days of Sumer for the place where dead people go. Don't you see, we're *all* in the House of Dust and Darkness!"

"No," Herod said, edging still farther back as Gilgamesh made men-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

acing gestures. "I don't know anything about Sumer, but that's what the building is actually called. I've seen it. The name's written right over the front porch in plain English. It's just a jail, Gilgamesh. It's Dumuzi's special upscale jail for his political prisoners, very nice, very comfortable. It looks like a hotel."

"You've seen it, you say?"

"Tukulti-Sharrukin took me there."

"And Enkidu? You saw him?"

"No. I didn't go inside. It's not *that* much like a hotel. But Tukulti-Sharrukin says—"

"Who is this Assyrian? Why do you have such faith in what he tells you?"

"Trust me. He hates Dumuzi—something about a business deal that went sour, a real screwing, he and the king going partners on a land-development scheme and the king goniffing up the profits. He'll do anything to stick it to Dumuzi now. He told me all about it the night of the feast. He and I hit it off like *this*, Gilgamesh, just like *this*. He's a member of the tribe, you know."

"He's what?"

"A Jew. Like me."

Gilgamesh frowned. "I thought he was an Assyrian."

"An Assyrian Jew. His grandfather was Assyrian ambassador to Israel in King David's time and fell in love with one of David's nieces, and so he had to convert in order to marry her. It must have been one devil of a scandal, a royal niece not only marrying a *goy* but an Assyrian, yet. David wanted to murder him, but he had diplomatic immunity, so the king had him declared *persona non grata* and he was sent home to Nineveh, but somehow he took her with him and then the family stayed kosher after he got back to Assyria. You could have knocked me over with a straw when he said he was a Yid, because he's got that mean Assyrian face with the nose coming right out of the forehead, you know, and the peculiar curly beard they all wear, but when you listen for a little while to the way he speaks you won't have any doubt that he's—"

"When I listen for a little while to the way *you* speak," said Gilgamesh, "I feel like strangling you. Can't any of you Jews ever keep to the point? I don't care who this ridiculous tribesman of yours did or did not marry. What I want to know is, will he help us to free Enkidu or won't he?"

"Don't be an anti-Semite, Gilgamesh. It doesn't look good on you. Tukulti-Sharrukin promises to do what he can for us. He knows the guy who runs the main computer at the House of Dust and Darkness. He'll try to bugger up the software so that Enkidu's name gets dropped from the prisoner roster, and maybe then we can slip him out the back way. But

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

no guarantees. It isn't going to be easy. We'll know in a day or two whether it's going to work out. I'm doing my best for you, you know."

Gilgamesh closed his eyes and breathed deeply. Herod was a colossal pain in the fundament, but he did get things done.

"All right. Forgive me my impatience, Herod."

"I love it when you apologize. A minute ago you had that I-suffer-no-fools-gladly gleam in your eye and I thought you were going to knock me from here to New Hell."

"Why *should* I suffer fools gladly?"

"Right. But I'm not all that much of a fool." Herod grinned. "Let's get on to other things. You know that Dumuzi has a contract out on you, don't you?"

"A contract?" said Gilgamesh, baffled again.

"Zeus! Where did you learn your English? Dumuzi wants to have you killed, is what I'm saying. Tukulti-Sharrukin told me that too. Dumuzi's frightened shitless that you're going to make a grab for power here, and so—"

"Yes, I know. Three buffoons tried to jump me as I was leaving Picasso's. One of them admitted that he was working for Dumuzi."

"You kill them?"

"I just damaged them a little. They're probably halfway to Pompeii by now, but I suppose there'll be others. I'll lose no sleep over it. Where's Sulla?"

"At the baths, trying to sober himself up. He and I have an audience with the king in a little while. Sulla wants to set up a trade deal, swap Dumuzi a couple dozen of his spare necromancers and thaumaturges and shamans for a few barrels of the diamonds and rubies and emeralds that he thinks Dumuzi possesses by the ton."

"Even a fool could see there is no great abundance of diamonds and rubies in this city."

"You tell Sulla that. I'm just an employee. The Devil has put it into him that this city is overflowing with precious gems, and you know how he salivates for precious gems. He'd sell his sister for six pounds of sapphires. *Meshuggenah. Goyishe kup.* Well, he'll find out. How did things go with you and Picasso?"

"He made me wear a strange mask, a bull's face. But when he painted me, he was in the painting too, and the mask was on him. I could not understand that, Herod."

"It's art. Don't try to understand it."

"But—"

"Trust me. The man's a genius. Have faith in him. He'll paint a masterpiece, and who gives a crap which one of you has the mask? But you don't understand these things, do you, Gilgamesh? You were great stuff

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in your time, they all tell me, a terrific warrior and a splendid civil engineer, even, but you do have your limits. After all, you have a *goyishe kup* too. Although I have to admit you manage all right, considering your handicap."

"You use too many strange words. *Goyishe kup*?"

"It means you have Gentile brains."

"Gentile?"

"It means not Jewish. Don't be offended. You know how much I admire you. Do you and Picasso get along all right?"

"We find each other amusing. He has invited me to sit with him at the bullfight on Sunday."

"Yes, the bullfight. His grand passion, watching skinny Spaniards stick swords into big angry animals. Another *meshuggenah*, Picasso. Him and his bullfights. A genius, but a *meshuggenah*."

"And a *goyishe kup*?" Gilgamesh asked.

Herod looked startled. "Him? Well, I suppose so. I suppose. But a genius, all the same. At least he makes great paintings out of his bullfights. And everyone's entitled to a hobby of some sort, I guess. An obsession, even."

"And what is yours?" said the Sumerian.

Herod winked. "Surviving."

It was one of those nights that went by in a moment, in the blink of an eye. That often happened in Hell; they were balanced by the days that seemed to last a week or two, or a month. Gilgamesh had been here so long that he scarcely minded Hell's little irregularities. He could remember clearly enough how it had been on Earth, the days in succession coming around at predictable intervals, but that seemed unreal to him now and woefully oppressive. Sleep meant little here, meals were unimportant: why should all the days be the same length? What did it matter?

Now, by common consent, it was Sunday. The day of the bullfight. The calendar too fluttered and slid about, no rhyme, no reason. But the bullfight was to be held on Sunday, and the bullfight was today, and therefore today was Sunday. Tomorrow might be Thursday. What did it matter? What did it matter? Today was the day he would be reunited with Enkidu, if all went well. That was what mattered.

The night, brief as it was, had been enlivened by a second attempt on Gilgamesh's life. Nothing so crude as a team of thugs this time, but it was simpleminded all the same, the old snake-in-the-ventilating-shaft routine. Gilgamesh heard slitherings in the wall. The grille, he discovered, had been loosened, probably by the maids who had come in to turn down the bed. He pushed it open and stood to one side, sword at the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ready. The snake was a fine one, glossy black with brilliant red markings and eyes like yellow fire. Its fangs had the sheen of chrome steel. He regretted having to chop it in two; but what alternative, he wondered, did he have? Trap it in a bedsheet and call room service to take it away?

The same motor-chariots that had transported Gilgamesh and his companions to the royal feasting-hall a few nights before were waiting out front to bring them to the stadium that morning. The bullfight, evidently, was the event of the season in Uruk. Half the city was going, judging by the number of cars traveling in the direction of the arena.

Herod rode with Gilgamesh. The driver was a Sumerian, who genuflected before Gilgamesh with obvious awe: no assassin, not this one, unless he was one of the best actors in Hell.

The bullfight was being held well outside the city, in the sandy hill country to the east. The day was hot and overcast. Some long-fanged bat-winged demon-creatures, purple and red and green, soared lazily in the hazy sky.

"It's all arranged," said Herod in a low voice, leaning toward Gilgamesh. They were near the stadium now. Gilgamesh could see it, tier upon stone tier rising from the flat desert. "Tukulti-Sharrukin will try to spring Enkidu from the House of Dust and Darkness just as the bullfight's getting started. We'll have half a dozen of Sulla's men posted nearby, with three of the Land Rovers. Everybody knows what to do. When Enkidu comes out of the jail building, he'll get into one of the Rovers and all three will take off in different directions, but they'll all head out this way."

"And Vy-otin?"

"Smith, you mean?"

"Smith, yes!"

"He'll be waiting just outside the stadium, the way you wanted. When the Land Rovers show up, Smith will meet the one with Enkidu and bring him in, and lead him to the box where you and Picasso will be sitting, which is right next to the royal box. Dumuzi will have a stroke when he sees him."

"If not when he sees him, then when I embrace him before the entire town," Gilgamesh said. "The hero Gilgamesh reunited with his beloved Enkidu! What can Dumuzi say? What can he do? Everyone will be cheering. And after the bullfight—"

"Yes?" Herod said. "After the bullfight, what?"

"I will pay a call on King Dumuzi," said Gilgamesh. "I will speak to him about the unfortunate error of judgment that led his officials to imprison my friend. I will do it very politely. Perhaps I will speak to him also about the state of law and order in the streets of his city, and about proper maintenance of the ventilating systems of his hostelry here. But

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that will be afterward. First we will enjoy the pleasure of the bullfight, eh?"

"Yes," said Herod glumly. "First the bullfight."

"You don't look pleased."

"I never even liked to go to the gladiators," the Judaean said. "And they deserved what they did to each other. But a poor dumb innocent bull? All that bleeding, all that pain?"

"Fighting bulls is an art," Gilgamesh replied. "Your great genius Picasso the painter told me so himself. And you are a man of culture, Herod. Think of it as a cultural experience."

"I'm a Jewish liberal, Gilgamesh. I'm not supposed to enjoy cruelty to animals."

"A Jewish what?"

"Never mind," said Herod.

The chariot pulled up in a holding area in front of the stadium. At close range the circular structure was enormous, a true Roman coliseum on the grand scale, five or perhaps six levels high. The topmost tier was partly in ruins, many of its great stone arches shattered; but the rest of the building seemed intact and splendid. There were throngs of people in colorful holiday garb walking around on every level.

As he got out of the car Gilgamesh caught sight of Vy-otin, in slacks and a loose short-sleeved shirt, waving to him from a point near one of the ticket booths. The long-legged Ice-Hunter chieftain stood out clearly above the short, square-hewn, largely Sumerian crowd all about him.

He came over at once. "There's trouble," he said.

"Enkidu?"

"You," Vy-otin said. "One of my people overheard something in a washroom. Dumuzi's putting snipers on the top tier. When things start getting exciting and everybody's yelling, they're going to open fire on Picasso's box. The prime target is you, but they're likely to hit Picasso too, and your mother, and anyone else who's close by. You've got to get out of here."

"No. Impossible."

"Are you crazy? How are you going to guard yourself against shots from the sky? Someone your size will be the easiest target in the world."

"How many men do you have here?" Gilgamesh asked.

"Nine."

"That should be plenty. Send them up on top to take out the snipers."

"There'll still be a risk that—"

"Yes. Maybe there will. Where's your warlike spirit, Vy-otin? Have you truly become Henry Smith? Dumuzi can't have put a hundred sharpshooters up there. There'll be two or three, is my guess. Five at most. You'll have plenty of time to find them. They'll be easy enough to spot.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

They won't be Sumerian, and they'll be looking nervous, and they'll have rifles or some other cowardly New Dead armament. Your men will locate them one by one and push them off the edge. No problem."

Vy-otin nodded. "Right," he said. "See you later."

Picasso closed his eyes and let memory come seeping back: the old life, the thyme-scented tang of dry Mediterranean air in the summer, the heat, the crowds, the noise. If he didn't look, he could almost make himself believe he was eight or nine years old, sitting beside his tall sandy-bearded father in the arena at Malaga again where the bullfights were the finest and most elegantly conducted in the world. Sketching, always sketching, even then, the picador on his little bony blindfolded old horse, the haughty matador, the mayor of the city in his grand box. Or he could think this was the bull-ring of La Coruna, or the one at Barcelona, or even the one at Arles in southern France, an old Roman stadium just like this one, where he would go every year when he was old, with his wife Jacqueline, with his son Paul, with Sabartés.

Well, all that was long ago in another world. This was Hell, and the sky was murky and the air was thick and acrid, and the crowd around him was chattering in English, in Greek, in some Mesopotamian babble, in just about everything but good honest Spanish. In the midst of the hubbub he sat motionless, waiting, hands at his sides, silent, solitary. There might well have been no one else around him. He was aware that the priestess-woman Ninsun was beside him, more splendid than ever in a robe of deep purple shot through with threads of gold, and that her giant son the warrior Gilgamesh sat beside him also, and the faithful Sabartés, and the little Jewish Roman man, Herod, and the other Roman, the fat old dictator, Sulla. But all those people had become mere wraiths to him now. As he waited for the *corrida* to begin he saw only the ring, and the gate behind which the bulls were kept, and the shadows cast by the contest that was to come.

"It will not be long now, Don Pablo," Sabartés murmured. "We have been waiting for the king. But you see, he is in his box now, *el rey*." Sabartés gestured toward his left, to the royal box just alongside theirs. With a flicker of his eye Picasso saw the foolish-looking king waving and smiling to the crowd. He nodded. One must wait for the king to arrive, yes, he supposed. But he did not want to wait any longer. He was formally dressed, a dark blue business suit, a white shirt, even a necktie: the *corrida* was a serious matter, it demanded respect. But in this humidity he was far from comfortable. Once the fight started he would no longer notice the weather or the pinching at his throat or the sweaty stickiness along his back. Just let it start soon, he thought. Let it start soon.

What was this? Some new commotion close at hand?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The huge Sumerian was up and prancing about and shouting. "Enkidu! Enkidu!"

"Gilgamesh!" bellowed a newcomer, just as enormous but twice as frightful, shouldering his way into the box. "My own true brother! My friend!"

This one was a Sumerian too, by the look of him. But he was strange and shaggy, almost like a beast, with a fiery, smouldering look about him and black hair tumbling into his eyes and a beard so dense it hid most of his face. Another Minotaur, Picasso thought: an even truer one than the first. They were embracing like two mountains now, Gilgamesh and this other, this Enkidu. Gilgamesh was like a child in his excitement. Now he clapped Enkidu on the back with a blow that would have felled a dragon, and now he dragged him over to meet Ninsun, before whom Enkidu fell in a pose of utter devotion, kneeling and kissing her hem, and now Gilgamesh was nodding toward Dumuzi's box and both men began to laugh. "And this," said Gilgamesh, "this is the painter Picasso, who is a great genius. He paints like a demon. Maybe he *is* a demon. But he is very great. This is his bullfight, today."

"This little man? He will fight bulls?"

"He will watch," Gilgamesh said. "He loves that more than anything, except, I think, to paint: to watch the bulls being fought. As was done in his homeland."

"And tomorrow," said Picasso, "I will paint you, wild one. But that will be tomorrow. Now the bulls." Out of the corner of his mouth he said to Sabartés, "Well? Do we ever commence?"

"Indeed, Don Pablo. Now. Now."

There came a great flourish of trumpets. And then the grand entry procession began, the *cuadrillas* coming forth led by a pair of mounted *alguaciles* in eye-dazzling costumes. Everyone crossing the great arena, the banderilleros, the picadors riding hell-horses, and then finally the matador, this Blasco y Velez, this Spaniard of the time of Charles IV.

Sabartés had organized everything very well, Picasso thought. It all looked as it was supposed to look. The men, the subordinates, moved with dignity and grace. They understood the grandeur of the moment. And the matador showed promise. He held himself well. He was a little thicker through the middle than Picasso was expecting—perhaps he was out of shape, or maybe in the time of Charles IV the style had been different, matadors had not been so slender—but his costume was right, the skintight silken trousers, the richly embroidered jacket and waistcoat of satin embroidered in gold and silver, the hat, the cape, the linen lace shirtwaist.

The procession halted before the two boxes of honor. The matador saluted the king, and then Picasso, who was the president of the bullfight

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

today. The king, who had been staring at the newly arrived Enkidu as though he were some sort of demon that had materialized in Picasso's box, and whose face now was as dour and foul as bile, acknowledged the salute with an offhand flick of his hand that Picasso found infuriating in its discourtesy. "*Puerco*," he muttered. "*Hijo de puta.*"

Then Picasso rose. As president he carried the keys to the bull-pens. With a grand swing of his arm he tossed them out to one of the *alguaciles*, who caught them nicely and rode over to release the first bull.

"And so we commence," said Picasso quietly to Sabartés. "*Al fin*, we commence."

He felt himself settling into the inviolable sphere of concentration that always enveloped him at the bullfight. In a moment he would feel as though he were the only one in the stadium.

The bull came galloping forth. *¡Madre de dios!* What a horror! That was no bull! That was an evil monster!

Sabartés had told him what to expect, but he had never quite grasped it, apparently. This could have been something out of one of his own paintings. The creature had six many-jointed legs, like some giant insect, and two rows of terrible spines on its back that dripped a nasty fluid, and great flopping ears. Its skin was green with purple blotches, and like a lizard's. There were horns, short and curved and sharp and very much like a bull's, but otherwise this was pure hell-creature.

Picasso shot a venomous look at Sabartés. "What have you done? You call that a bull?"

"We are in Hell, Pablo," said Sabartés wearily. "They do not send bulls to Hell, only human beings. But this will do. It is much like a bull, in its way."

"*¡Chingada!*" Picasso said, and spat.

But they were making a brave attempt down in the arena. The banderilleros were dancing around the bull, striving to plant their little lances in the beast's neck, and sometimes succeeding. The hell-bull, maddened, charged this way and that, going for the horses of the picadors, who warded it off with thrusts of their pikes. Picasso could see that these were experienced men out there, who knew what they were doing and were doing their best, though plainly the hell-bull puzzled them. They were trying to wear it down to make it ready for the Hour of Truth, and by and large they were achieving that. Picasso felt the bullfight slip around him like a cloak. He was wholly engulfed in it now. He saw nothing else but the bull and the men in the ring.

Then he looked toward the matador, waiting his moment to one side, and everything turned sour.

The matador was frightened. You could see it in his nostrils, you could see it in the angle of his chin. Perhaps he had been a master of his art

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

back there in the time of Charles IV, but he had never fought anything like this thing, and he was not going to do it well. That was plain. He was not going to do it well.

The trumpets sounded. It was the moment.

Blasco y Velez came forward, holding out the *muleta*, the little red silk cape, and the *capote*, the big work cape. But he moved stiffly, and it was the wrong stiffness, the stiffness of fear rather than the stiffness of courage. The picadors and the banderilleros saw it, and instead of leaving the ring they withdrew to one side, exchanging uneasy glances. Picasso saw it. The hell-bull saw it. The matador's moves were awkward and hesitant. He didn't seem to know how to use his capes—had the art not progressed that far, in the time of Charles IV?—and he had no grace and he took quick, mincing steps. He led the bull around and around, working closer and closer to him, but that should have been beautiful and it was merely depressing.

"No," Picasso said under his breath. "Get him out of there!"

"He is our only matador, Pablo," Sabartés said.

"He will die. And he will die stupidly."

"He looked better when I saw him yesterday. But that was with a heifer."

Picasso groaned. "He will die now. Look."

There had been a shift of equilibrium in the ring. Blasco y Velez was no longer working the bull; the bull was working Blasco y Velez. Round and round, round and round—the bull picking up speed—the picadors trying now to intervene, Blasco y Velez backing away but now finally putting a brave face on things, trying a desperate *verónica*, a *farol*, a *mariposa*, a *serpentina*, a *mediaverónica*—yes, yes, he knew his work, he understood the art, except that he was trying to do everything at once, and where was his control, where was his stillness, where was his art? The bull, passing him, snarled and nipped him in the shoulder. Blood flowed. Blasco y Velez jumped back and went for his sword—forbidden, to use the sword in mere self-defense—but the bull knocked it from his grasp with a contemptuous whirl, and swung on past, throwing down a picador's horse and goring it, and coming back again toward the matador—

"No!" came a tremendous roar from Gilgamesh's shaggy friend, the huge Enkidu.

And then the new Sumerian giant leaped from the stone bench and vaulted down into the arena.

"Enkidu!" Gilgamesh cried.

Picasso gasped. This was becoming crazy, now. This was turning into a nightmare. The big Sumerian picked the hapless matador up and tossed him aside to safety as though he were a doll. Then he came toward the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

bull, caught it by the double rows of spines, swung himself up easily onto the beast's back, and began to throttle it.

"No, no, no!" Picasso muttered. "Clown! Butcher! Sabartés, stop this idiocy! What is he doing! *Riding* the bull? *Strangling* the bull?" Tears of rage crowded into his eyes. His first *corrida* in who knew how long, and a dreadful one, and now it was dissolving into absurd chaos. He stood on his seat, bellowing. "Butchery! Madness! For shame! For shame!"

Enkidu was in trouble. He was on the bull, but in another moment the bull was going to roll over and kill him, or hurl him loose and fall upon him with its hooves. That was the one thing Gilgamesh saw, and nothing else mattered to him. To have won him back once more, and then to lose him again in this craziness of a bullfight—no, no, it could not be. It was like that time when the Bull of Heaven was loose in old Uruk, and Enkidu had mounted it and seized it by its horns and tried to force it to the ground. It had taken both of them to slay the bull that time. It would again.

He snatched up his sword. Herod saw him and grabbed at his arm, crying, "Gilgamesh! No! Don't go out there!" The Sumerian swatted him aside and clambered down over the edge of the box. Enkidu, holding on with difficulty atop the plunging, bucking monster, grinned to him.

The whole stadium seemed to be going insane.

People were up, milling about, screaming. Fist-fights were breaking out everywhere. Dumuzi was on his feet, eyes wild, face purple, making frantic gestures. Glancing upward, Gilgamesh had a quick glimpse of struggling figures outlined against the rim of the arena. Dumuzi's snipers, fighting with Vy-otin's men? And farther up, a flock of demon-birds circled in the sky, ghastly things with gaping beaks and long shimmering wings.

The bull, lurching from side to side, was trying to shake Enkidu free. Gilgamesh rushed forward and took a spew of the bull's sweat in his face. It burned like acid. He drew his sword, but the bull backed out of range, and twisted itself so violently that Enkidu nearly was flung from its back. Yet he showed no fear at all. He held tight, thighs gripping the bull's back just in front of the spines, and took a firm hold on the thing's diabolical horns. With all his great strength he fought to force the bull's head downward.

"Strike, brother, strike!" Enkidu called.

But it was too soon. The bull had plenty of fight left in him. It whirled wildly around, and the scaly skin of its flank caught Gilgamesh across the ribs and drew blood. It leaped and bucked, leaped and bucked, slamming its hooves against the ground. Enkidu flailed about like a pennant flapping in the breeze. He seemed about to lose his grip; then he called

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

out in his most confident tone and rose again, rearing high above the creature's razor-sharp back. He regained his grip on the horns and twisted, and the bull yielded and weakened, lowering its head, turning so that the nape of its neck was toward Gilgamesh.

"Strike!" Enkidu called again.

And this time Gilgamesh drove the blade home.

He felt a quivering, a shudder, a powerful movement within the creature. It seemed to resist its death a long moment; but the blow had been true, and suddenly its legs collapsed. Gilgamesh extended a hand toward Enkidu as he sprang free of it and came down beside him.

"Ah, brother," Enkidu said. "Like the old days, yes?"

Gilgamesh nodded. He looked outward. On every level of the stadium there was frenzy, now. Gilgamesh was amazed to see that Dumuzi had left the royal box and had leaped into Picasso's. As though fearing for his own safety, the king had one arm tight around Ninsun's waist and held Picasso with the other arm around his throat, and was dragging them from the box, struggling with his two hostages toward the exit.

"Your mother," Enkidu said. "And your little painter."

"Yes. Come on."

They rushed back toward the stands. But suddenly Ninsun twisted about and reached toward one of the guards in the box adjoining. When she swung around again a dagger was in her hand. Dumuzi attempted to shove Picasso against it, but as Gilgamesh stared in amazement his mother pivoted away with the agility of a warrior, reached around, drove the dagger into Dumuzi's side. In the same instant Sulla, coming from the rear, put his sword through the king's middle. Dumuzi fell and was swept underfoot. Picasso stood unmoving, as if lost in a dream. Ninsun looked at the hand that still held the dagger as though she had never seen her hand before.

"Up here!" Vy-otin called to Gilgamesh, not from Picasso's box but from the royal one. "Quickly!"

The Ice-Hunter extended a hand. Gilgamesh jumped upward beside him.

"On the royal bench. Fast!"

"What—"

"Dumuzi's dead. He panicked when the snipers didn't open fire, and tried to escape with Picasso and your mother as hostages, and—"

"Yes. I saw it."

"You're the king here now. Get up there and act like one."

"King?" Gilgamesh said, struggling to comprehend.

Vy-otin shoved him. He caught hold of the edge of the royal bench and pulled himself up on it, and turned and looked upward toward the many tiers of the arena. The sky had darkened and was full of screeching

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

demons. Surging mobs were boiling back and forth. Everyone seemed to have gone berserk.

He extended his arms. "People of Uruk!" he cried, in a voice like an erupting volcano. "Hear me! I am Gilgamesh! Hear me!"

"Gilgamesh!" came the sudden answering roar. "Gilgamesh the King! Gilgamesh! Gilgamesh!"

"You're doing fine," Vy-otin said.

He felt figures close around him. Herod, Sulla, Vy-otin— Enkidu —Ninsun—Picasso—

He turned to them.

"By Enlil, I swear to you I did not come here to make myself king," he said angrily.

"We understand that," said Herod.

"Of course," said Sulla.

"Keep waving your arms," said Vy-otin. "They're starting to settle down. Just tell them to take their seats and stay calm."

"Gilgamesh!" came the great roar again. "Gilgamesh the King!"

"You see?" Vy-otin said. "You're doing just fine, your majesty. Just fine."

Yes. Yes. He felt the rush of oncoming power now, that sense of strength and righteous force that the word *majesty* summed up. Perhaps he had not come here to make himself king, but now he was king all the same, king of Uruk in Hell as once he had been king of Uruk in Sumer the Land. He gestured and felt the crowd in his hand. "People of Uruk! I am your king! Take your seats! All of you, take your seats!"

They were obeying now. The stadium grew quiet.

Enkidu said, "Have them send out another of those bulls. You and I will fight it, Gilgamesh. We'll fight all the bulls they can throw at us. Yes? Yes?"

Gilgamesh glanced at Picasso. "What do you say? Shall we continue the bullfight?"

"Ah, *compañero*, that is no way to fight a bull, the way you two do it. It is not what I came here to see, this jumping on the bull's back." Then the little man laughed. "But that is no bull, eh, King Gilgamesh? So why must it be fought according to the Spanish way? Go. Go. Commence your reign with a *corrida* in the Uruk style. Show us what you can do, my friend. I will sketch you as you work."

Gilgamesh nodded. To Herod he said quietly, "Get the late king out of here, will you? And have the arch-vizier and the rest of the court officials rounded up." With a gesture to Enkidu to accompany him he leaped down again into the bull-ring. He shouted to the *alguaciles* across the way and the gate opened and a second hell-bull came charging forth. Calmly the new king of Uruk waited for it with Enkidu at his side. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ON BOOKS by Norman Spinrad

THE STRANGE CASE OF J.G. BALLARD

He has been publishing his own idiosyncratic brand of science fiction for thirty years now. He was a central figure—arguably *the* central figure—of the New Wave of the 1960s. He is acknowledged as a seminal influence by the Cyberpunks of the 1980s. He was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. He had a number one best-seller in Britain. He is a major literary figure in France. He has been talked about for the Nobel. And at this writing, he is about to be a very major motion picture.

He has never won a Hugo. He has never won a Nebula. His books have never really sold well in the United States, and truth be told, at times he has had difficulty placing them with American publishers at all. His collection, *The Atrocity Exhibition*, was bought, scheduled, announced, and then had its publication canceled by two American publishers before finally appearing as *Love and Napalm: Export USA*. *Empire of the Sun*, the aforementioned Booker Prize nominee and number one British best-seller, flopped as a hardcover in the United States and has thus far not had a real mass market edition.

J.G. Ballard began publishing in 1956 and his early stories appeared in conventional SF publications. Over the next few years, stories like "Prima Belladonna," "Billenium," and "The Voices of Time" earned him a reputation as a unique and powerful voice in science fiction on both sides of the Atlantic.

1962 saw the publication of his first novel, *The Wind from Nowhere*, the first of a series of disaster novels, the others being *The Drowned World*, *The Burning World*, and *The Crystal World*, in which civilization is destroyed by wind, flood, drought, and crystallization, respectively. These books established him as a major science fiction novelist in America as well as Britain.

In the middle to late 1960s during the crest of the New Wave, Ballard wrote a series of so-called "condensed novels"—"The Assassination of JFK Considered As a Downhill Motor Race," "Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan," "You and Me and the Continuum," "The

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Atrocity Exhibition," etc.—many of which were first published in Michael Moorcock's *New Worlds*, and most of which were collected in *The Atrocity Exhibition*. Ballard also wrote occasional criticisms of fiction, non-fiction, art, and culture for *New Worlds*. He was not only a central literary figure of the New Wave, he was deeply involved in the development of its esthetic theories, and it was Ballard who coined the catch-phrase "inner space."

In the 1970s, while continuing his prolific production of short fiction, Ballard published *Crash*, a bizarre novel centered on car crashes, and two "urban disaster novels," *Concrete Island* and *High-Rise*, in which the disasters, rather than being climatological, are entirely man-made.

By this time, Ballard had established himself as an important figure in international literary circles. Contrariwise, his commercial viability as a science fiction writer in the United States was on the wane.

In 1984, Ballard published *Empire of the Sun*, an autobiographical novel of his days as a boy in Japanese-occupied China during World War II. *Empire of the Sun* was an enormous literary and commercial success in Britain but pretty much bit the Big One in the United States.

It has nevertheless been turned into a major motion picture by no less than Steven Spielberg.

The word is not yet in on his latest novel, *The Day of Creation*, just published in Britain as I write this, and yet to see print in the United States.

This capsule publishing history epitomizes, at least to an extent, the corresponding three decades of dialectic between British and American science fiction.

In the 1950s and into the early 1960s, science fiction as a whole was dominated by works written in English (as it still is), and Anglophone science fiction was both strongly transatlantic and economically dominated by American publication.

British writers like John Brunner, John Christopher, Brian Aldiss, and John Wyndham were able to compete in the American market (where the wordage rates, advances, and royalties were more lucrative) with the native science fiction writers. What they were actually writing was not very much different from the broad mainstream of American SF, and they were hardly perceived as all that identifiably British on this side of the Atlantic.

The same could more or less be said of J.G. Ballard at this phase in his career. The early stories did not have too much trouble seeing print in the United States; they were even published here in collections, and if they were regarded as somewhat more "literary" than the usual run of stuff and more than a little weird, no more so than say Sturgeon, Cordwainer Smith, Dick, or Bester.

The first three "disaster novels"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

were published in the United States as science fiction in a regular Ballard program and were perceived as such, disaster novels in the tradition of John Wyndham, John Christopher, Balmer & Wylie, etc.

The Wind from Nowhere, The Drowned World, and *The Burning World* were more or less straightforward ecological disaster novels, or so it seemed, at least, until the publication of the final book in the "series," *The Crystal World*, in 1966. *The Crystal World* was something else again, and cast the three previous novels in a new perspective.

Wind, water, and heat were the straightforward McGuffins in the first three novels, readily acceptable and comprehensible in realistic science fictional terms, even rather scientifically rigorous in their extrapolation. But the disaster McGuffin in *The Crystal World* was mumbo-jumbo in hard science terms and only made sense on a metaphysical and metaphorical level.

Organic forms begin to crystallize into inorganic versions of themselves, the effect radiating from a center deep in the jungle. As the protagonist penetrates deeper and deeper towards the center of crystallization, the effect spreads outward with an inevitability that makes it clear that the whole world will eventually be transformed into the Crystal World of the title. The protagonist becomes infected by the "crystal disease" and the deeper in towards the center he goes, the more he himself becomes crystallized, physically and psychologically.

And as the novel progresses, the disaster, the spreading crystallization within and without, is transformed from a sinister plague into a thing of physical and metaphysical beauty, so that by the time the novel ends and the final crystallization is completed, it is seen not as a devolution of the organic and human sphere into something dead and inorganic but as a kind of mystical apotheosis. The transformed protagonist and the transformed landscape are united in an eternal moment of crystalline clarity.

You will notice that I refer to the viewpoint character of *The Crystal World* as the "protagonist," not the "hero." From the retrospective vantage of *The Crystal World* it is easy enough to see that the previous three Ballardian disaster novels have no "heroes" either.

In contrast to the traditional SF disaster novels in which heroic characters struggle against and, more often than not, triumph over the altered physical realm, Ballard's characters devolve into and as often as not merge psychically with the transformed landscape. In the first three disaster novels, this can be and was seen as people simply devolving psychologically under the pressure of physical disaster, but *The Crystal World* makes it clear that all the Ballardian disaster novels have the merger of character into landscape, "inner space" into external environment,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and vice versa, at their thematic core, and that Ballard's concern is more esthetic and coldly metaphysical than moral or even conventionally characterological.

In a sense then, the four disaster novels are indeed a kind of tetralogy. The first three dissolve devolving characters into a developing landscape, and then *The Crystal World* throws the whole thing into a deeper and more subtle perspective by portraying much the same melting of character into landscape, inner space into environmental surround, as a kind of *evolution*, a metaphysical transcendence.

The Crystal World marked Ballard's emergence from genre SF as a significant general literary figure in Britain and as a minor literary light in the United States, where the book was done as a "literary" novel. It also marked his literary emergence as a novelist of subtlety and power.

And the beginning of his eclipse as a science fiction writer within the SF community and as a commercially viable writer in the United States.

By the publication of *The Crystal World* in 1966, the New Wave controversy was already in full flower, the SF community was already becoming polarized, and Michael Moorcock and J.G. Ballard were at the center of the storm.

Moorcock was the editor of *New Worlds*, where most of the "New Wave" short fiction was being published and some of the novels in serial form as well. He was the major critical theorist (the Bruce Sterling of his day), and the writer he most frequently held up as an exemplar was Ballard.

With all the sturm und drang over establishment versus counterculture, hero versus anti-hero, outer space versus inner space, literary freedom versus censorship, upbeat versus downbeat, dope versus propeller beanies, the technical literary thesis that was at the heart of at least the British New Wave tends to become obscured.

Moorcock believed that traditional mimetic contemporary fiction had exhausted its material and fossilized its technique. He believed that science fiction offered theoretically boundless new vistas but was frozen into stylized action-adventure forms, slavish mimesis of reality, stereotypical image-systems, and conventionalized traditional prose.

What he sought to foster was hybrid vigor—the material of science fiction, the psychological depth and thematic ambition of traditional "high literature," written in new forms and new prose styles in the process of being invented. And he had a notion of the direction those forms and styles might take.

Moorcock proposed a fiction whose skein of events, instead of following the linear logic of a conventional plotline from problem through complication into successful climactic resolution, were organized non-linearly, as montage, in the manner of a film, so that the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

final closure would be an accumulation of images, an ultimate union of metaphor with event, signifier with significand, inner with outer, in a resolution satisfying on both a content level and an imagistic level, like a successful poem.

To achieve this, a prose line was required that avoided obvious statement, that eschewed the constraints of mimetic reportage of events in favor of imagistic transformations, that skipped selectively over the surface of reality, that transmuted the mundane into the extraordinary, that grounded the extraordinary in the dreamlike but somehow familiar psychological landscape of the characters' and the readers' inner space.

Examples of such writing were to be found in the work of William Burroughs, Jerzy Kosinski, Mervyn Peake, the Moorcock of the Jerry Cornelius stories, and most pre-eminently in the work of J.G. Ballard.

Earlier short stories like "The Voices of Time," "Billenium," and particularly the stories set in the decaying resort of Vermillion Sands, followed much of Moorcock's schema before the fact. And the disaster novels, with their morally neutral imagistic observance of the transformation of the inner landscape to match the altered environment, with their reliance on physical description rather than conventional storytelling to convey inner meaning, were already moving in that direction before culminating in *The Crystal World*, in which the metaphorical system *is* the surface of the novel's reality, in which the protagonist's inner space becomes one with the metaphorically transmuted outer landscape, in which the resolution, horrific in conventional plot and character terms, becomes satisfying on an entirely imagistic level, a closure that succeeds on metaphorical esthetics alone.

This, needless to say, is a far cry from what makes Hugo or Nebula award winning SF succeed, and has very little to do as well with what makes commercial fiction, SF or otherwise, move off the racks.

With the publication of *The Crystal World*, Ballard was already beginning to come under attack from traditional SF circles, particularly in the United States, and the criticism was applied in a somewhat revisionary manner to his previous work too.

Ballard's characters were antiheroes. They did not respond to the challenges of disaster by fighting back with pluck and courage and technological puissance like good SF heroes should, they despaired, they devolved; they gave up, they allowed themselves to be gobbled up by the hostile universe, they accepted it, they even came to welcome it. Science and rationality did not inevitably triumph in Ballard's scheme of things—far from it. The man was a nihilist. Anti-rational. Downbeat. A real bummer.

And he was in the forefront of this damn New Wave thing over in London.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And indeed he was.

About the time *The Crystal World* was published, Ballard's "condensed novels" began to appear, mostly in *New Worlds*. And if *The Crystal World* and the earlier short fiction were "New Wave" only in retrospect, helping to formulate the theoretical underpinnings, the condensed novels were written under the early influence of the movement and in turn served as exemplars of what the new SF could become.

These short stories—and most of them are quite short—really *are* condensed novels in a formal sense. Scenes are rendered as sequences of rapid-fire images, each of which is redolent with multiple and ambiguous meaning.

The scenes in turn succeed each other in rapidly-cut montage, the structure arises out of their successive and sometimes repetitive juxtapositions, the psyches of the characters are seen to mutate in a series of isolated cuts rather than linearly, and the resolutions, such as they are, are imagistic, rather than climactic.

It is as if Ballard took whole novels and edited out all the transitions, all the build-ups to situations, all the personal interactions, most of the dialogue, all extraneous description, and condensed them to a series of freeze-frames, extracted moments of epiphany, a kind of flip-book version in which the essence of a whole novel is conveyed in a perfectly selected series of still-shots.

Though the condensed novels were a brilliant technical achievement whose influence on short science fiction in particular has been enormous, they were hardly the sort of thing likely to be short-listed for the Hugo or even the Nebula, nor likely to appeal to any but a quite literate audience, defying as they did all conventional mimetic and story expectations. And the bizarre and obsessive imagery which permeates them did not exactly make them more accessible to science fiction enthusiasts or the general mass audience.

Unlike the disaster novels, Ballard's settings in the condensed novels are relentlessly technological—decaying cityscapes, the malfunctioning technosphere, the randomly mutating media landscape. And the condensed novels are largely set in an America that Ballard knew only as contemporary myth. And the same images appear over and over again.

Motorways. Marilyn Monroe. Car crashes. JFK. Ronald Reagan. Abandoned airfields. Jacqueline Kennedy. Eniwetok Island. Ralph Nader. The *Enola Gay*. Sexualized car parts and crashes. Hospitals. The Dallas Schoolbook Depository. The atomic bomb. Lee Harvey Oswald.

Ballard seemed to be ransacking contemporary media coverage for images. And the imagistic montages he put together out of these bits and pieces of contemporary mythology were deeply disturbing, not to say outraging, to conven-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tional, and even unconventional sensibilities.

Surely the two most notorious of these condensed novels were "The Assassination of JFK Considered as a Downhill Motor Race" and "Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan."

"The Assassination of JFK Considered as a Downhill Motor Race" narrates the events of the Kennedy assassination as if the whole thing were indeed a motor race. Ballard sets up this metaphorical assumption and proceeds to describe the dire events in Dallas in terms of racing imagery, as if they were being described by some kind of Martian sportscaster.

"Why I Want To Fuck Ronald Reagan" would seem to have been too much even for Moorcock. It first appeared in something called *Ronald Reagan, the Magazine of Poetry*, published out of London by Thomas M. Disch and John Sladek, two Americans, who, like myself, had migrated to Britain to be at the heart of the New Wave ferment. When it appeared in the first American incarnation of *The Atrocity Exhibition*, at Doubleday, it caused the entire print run to be trashed.

Nelson Doubleday, so the story goes, was taking some VIPs on a tour through the printing plant as the book was coming off the presses, picked it up at random, saw the story, freaked, and ordered the entire print run, save six author's copies, fed directly into the pulper. Ballard, so the legend goes, then sent one copy to the then-governor of California with an anonymous note saying "Just thought you should see what filth Doubleday is printing about you."

"Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan" is just that—the undescribed narrator's explication of the charismatic sexual appeal of the man who was to become president a decade and a half later, and it draws an imagistic equation between the sexual appeal of Reagan and that of a car crashing into Ralph Nader's pudendum. Really. And makes it work.

For those open to such outré literary experimentalism, that is, which is to say, let's face it, an elite minority. In retrospect, it cannot be denied that the British New Wave was an elitist movement. In technical terms, it was centered on a complex literary theory as epitomized in Ballard's condensed novels, Moorcock's Jerry Cornelius stories, Aldiss' *Barefoot in the Head*, the short fiction of James Sallis, Langdon Jones, and M. John Harrison. In commercial terms, Moorcock was quite willing to see the circulation of *New Worlds* shrink to the natural audience for the sort of fiction he wished to publish. In audience terms, the writers began with the assumption that their hypothetical ideal reader was at least as intelligent, sophisticated, and literate as themselves.

This is how dedicated writers expand the bounds of the literary possible, but it is not the ideal way to separate Joe from his beer money.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

As a kind of literary laboratory, the New Wave succeeded admirably. For while Moorcock's theoretical new fiction never took hold in its pur sang form and even Ballard abandoned the condensed novel for the most part after he had thoroughly mastered it, the literary lessons of the New Wave diffused into the general literary culture of science fiction, and their liberating influence can be seen today in the work of American writers as varied as Lucius Shepard, William Gibson, Gregory Benford, Bruce Sterling, Greg Bear, Gene Wolfe, and Lisa Goldstein.

The primary audience for fiction as uncompromisingly experimental as Ballard's condensed novels is other writers, writers who absorb technique from it which they may then apply to the production of fiction with appeal to a more general audience. The obsessive imagery in the condensed novels, like that of William Burroughs, was too personal and recondite to render them accessible to a mass audience or even devotees of conventional "high literature."

But even Ballard himself was able to apply what he discovered in the lab to the writing of superficially more conventional and much more generally accessible fiction.

In the middle 1970s, as the New Wave was being absorbed into the generality of science fiction, he published three novels, *Crash*, *Concrete Island*, and *High-Rise*, which did much to transform his European reputation from that of an interesting experimentalist to that of a significant British literary figure read by "serious readers," if not by a mass audience.

Crash is a condensed novel writ large, almost impossible to describe or paraphrase, which works Ballard's obsessive car-crash imagery to the max, transmogrifying the car crash into an immense, murky, convoluted, and powerful image for the intersection of sex, power, death, and the technosphere. It is in many ways the culmination of the condensed novels.

And perhaps the exorcism of the obsessional material of this period, the content which made the condensed novels even more inaccessible than did the formal experimentalism, obscuring to some extent the technical achievement. For a new clarity of vision, a new narrative power, a new sheer storytelling ability, appears in *Concrete Island* and *High-Rise*, a melding of the disaster novels with both the concerns and the absorbed techniques of the condensed novel period.

Both *Concrete Island* and *High-Rise* are disaster novels, but unlike the previous disaster novels, they are *urban* disaster novels, taking place not in an altered natural realm but in the Ballardian technosphere of the condensed novels. *Concrete Island* takes place entirely on a traffic island in the middle of a motorway interchange. *High-Rise* takes place entirely inside an enormous self-contained apartment building.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

These are huge and powerful images for the modern western world, made all the more powerful because they are no mere metaphors. The high rise and the motorway are not only dominant images of the contemporary urban consciousness, they dominate the landscape of modern reality itself. Here Ballard has found node-points where the inner landscape and the outer landscape merge perfectly in a manner that needs no surreal dreamtime connection. The image *is* the reality, the reality *is* the image, and these two novels are therefore easily accessible on a mimetic level.

Concrete Island opens with the protagonist's car crashing onto the traffic island and the entire novel takes place on this bizarre yet entirely credible pocket universe beneath the motorway ramps, as he first seeks to escape from the traffic island, then begins to undercut his own efforts, and finally surrenders to the landscape in the prototypical Ballardian manner.

There is no surrealism here. The elements of the traffic island do not undergo imagistic transformation. They don't have to, for the car bodies, garbage dump, and bulldozed village of the traffic island, and the motorway ramps soaring above it, are *already* a perfect image system in the real world for what Ballard is trying to convey about modern reality. The story he tells is a series of failed escape attempts reminiscent structurally of the fate of poor Wile E. Coyote in a Roadrunner cartoon; straight line, taught with narrative tension, illuminating of character, and yet, because of the concretized metaphorical setting, rife with imagistic opportunities which Ballard fully exploits for irony and epiphany.

High-Rise is the perfect metaphorical yet realistic urban horror story. It takes place in a building which is designed to be a completely contained model of modern urban culture, with supermarkets, liquor stores, parking lot, boutiques, schools, pool, everything it takes to encapsulate urban man. The internal society *is* a pocket universe, and as it devolves, it mirrors general urban society in extremis.

The building was designed with a class structure built in—the apartments are more expensive the higher you go, and the more expensive your apartment the closer to the building you get to park—and so, Ballard implies, with the potential for class warfare also built in.

As things devolve, as conflicts, battles, tribal warfare, and finally permanent ongoing chaotic savagery break out, the evolution of modern urban man runs backward as the inhabitants come to welcome this stepwise shucking of civilized constraints as a liberation from the superego of modern society and a return to the feral innocence of the psychic jungle. As their pocket universe devolves toward the civilized vanishing point, they devolve toward creatures of pure egoistic lusts, characters merging

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

into a ruined urban landscape that their own devolving interior landscapes are creating, both landscapes becoming perfect images for each other, and both of them literally concretized by the real-life metaphor of the high rise apartment block.

By the late 1970s, then, Ballard was established as a significant literary figure in Britain and on the Continent, even while his career as science fiction writer was in eclipse in the United States. From the vantage point of today, we can see that the present schism between British and American science fiction began in the 1970s, and the strange case of J.G. Ballard nicely epitomizes what happened.

In the United States, science fiction was transformed from a minor publishing genre with consistent low sales from book to book no matter who wrote them into a major sphere of commercial publishing. In Britain, this never quite happened. In Britain, science fiction writers like Ballard and Aldiss were able to achieve general literary acceptance, Ballard via the congruence between New Wave SF and experimental literature, Aldiss by publishing a series of literate mainstream best-sellers. In America, *this*, generally speaking, did not happen.

So while American science fiction writers had the possibility of best-sellers dangled before them, British SF writers, thanks to the New Wave, had the possibility of acceptance into the general literary culture. As one American editor has observed, "The New Wave lost in the US and won in Britain."

And while this is certainly an oversimplification—since much of the literary technique of the New Wave were absorbed by American writers who used them for the most part in the service of more generally accessible SF than their British brethren were producing—it certainly is true to say that *Ballard*, the archetypal New Wave figure on both sides of the Atlantic, lost in the United States and won in Britain.

Ballard never wrote for a large mass audience. Back before American SF publishing went major league, neither did any other science fiction writer, so the low sales figures for his admittedly difficult work didn't matter and he was able to enjoy at least regular American publication on a par with his American colleagues. But once American science fiction started appearing regularly on the best-seller lists, once true commercial success was a real possibility, so was commercial failure, and once the publishers started paying rapt attention to the sales figures, writers like Ballard came to be deemed "commercially non-viable."

He was certainly not best-seller material. Nor was he a fave rave among SF fans. And he was too much the experimentalist and still too much the SF writer to be a mainstream literary lion. What he was was an experimentalist most appreciated by the avant garde and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

other writers, and what that means in terms of American publishing is small printings of obscure trade editions and non-viability in mass market. And that's how J.G. Ballard has been published in the United States for years.

In Britain, though, with reduced economic expectations, with a long literary history of non-genre science fiction in the tradition of Wells, Huxley, Orwell, and Burgess, with the penetration of a sector of the literary establishment by the energy of the New Wave, it is possible for a writer like Ballard to be adequately reviewed enough, to achieve stature enough, to find his natural audience—not SF fans or the average general reader but those interested in literarily adventurous fiction plugged in to the contemporary zeitgeist.

This would seem to be what many of the better British SF writers are after—an educated audience large enough to support them, economically and psychically, at the full stretch of their powers, rather than the maximum number of readers for their lowest common denominator. This has always been an elusive goal for science fiction writers in the United States, where Ballard, like most of his British colleagues and many American SF writers as well, has failed to achieve it.

And then in 1984, *Empire of the Sun* was published, and J. G. Ballard became a superstar in Britain. Not only did the novel zoom up the best-seller lists, it received wide critical acclaim which also brought favorable retrospective attention to Ballard's previous work and unquestionably established him as one of the most important living British writers.

Empire of the Sun was a quantum leap for Ballard not only in terms of sales and public stature but in absolute literary terms, and what is more, in it Ballard casts a psychohistorical perspective on his own inner landscape in a manner few if any other writers have attempted or achieved. Still further, it was the first Ballard novel to be readily engaging to a wide mass audience.

And no wonder.

Empire of the Sun is an autobiographical novel of Ballard's own boyhood experiences in and around Shanghai during the Japanese invasion and occupation of World War II. The novel opens with the invasion of Shanghai, follows young "Jim" through the occupation, and ends with the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the liberation. Jim is separated from his parents, survives on his own in their empty house, ends up in an internment camp, escapes, wanders solitary through the chaos and horrors of the Japanese occupation, and survives to become, all these years later, the James G. Ballard who has finally come to tell the tale.

On one level, the level that no doubt made *Empire of the Sun* a best-seller in Britain, this is an exciting action-adventure story with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a plucky young hero, set in an exotic wartime locale. Ballard's eye for detail is formidable, he writes action sequences very well indeed, the novel is utterly realistic, and the viewpoint stays superficially within the consciousness of young Jim.

This is probably the level upon which Steven Spielberg was attracted to the story, and the level upon which his film, unreleased as I write this, will no doubt primarily operate—the tale of the young boy's lone survival of the horrors of war and occupation.

But on another level, the level that no doubt got the novel shortlisted for the Booker Prize, *Empire of the Sun* is the archetypal Ballardian disaster novel, rendered with the hard-edged realism of *Concrete Island* and *High-Rise*, but managing to be so with the imagistic intensity of the short fiction.

Ballard is totally in control of all the diverse aspects of his writing here and for the first time has managed to bring all of it together to grab the mass reader with emotional immediacy while surrendering nothing of Ballard's subtlety, depth, intensity, or imagistic obsessions.

This is Jim's story, and the author's third person narration never wanders from the viewpoint of the boy, but this is J.G. Ballard the mature consciousness explicating his own boyhood tale, giving it historical perspective, psychological analysis, and prescient overtones of the coming post-war world, and doing so by transmuting the realistically rendered settings into the archetypal Ballardian imagistic landscape.

Actually, that's got it a bit backwards. For what Ballard reveals here is that his real-life experiences as the "Jim" of *Empire of the Sun* were the template of many of the imagistic obsessions of the short fiction, the devolving characters of the disaster novels, the distance of his characters from each other, the urban disaster areas of *Concrete Island* and *High-Rise*.

Empty buildings. Abandoned airfields. Wandering refugees from disaster. Barbed wire. Bombers. Wounded and/or ill protagonists. Eniwetok. Hiroshima. The Atom Bomb. Cracked concrete. The Disaster Area.

It's all here, and in its original prime reality version as Ballard lived it during World War II. Here is much of the source material of all the fiction that has gone before; the imagery, the Ballardian protagonist alienated from the landscape but finally merging into it, the impending ruins of the twentieth century and the existential plight of modern man within them.

Empire of the Sun is not science fiction, but it is informed by a characteristic Ballardian science fictional perspective, for, in light of his total oeuvre, what Ballard finally manages to achieve here is to illumine not only the roots of his own career but the genesis of the post-war world of its thematic obsessions. He does it by demonstrat-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing just how those imagistic obsessions and modern icons arose out of the real landscape of a real Disaster Area, the Second World War.

And he does one more thing in *Empire of the Sun* that he has never done before. He creates, in Jim, a sympathetic hero who survives by his wits, with whom the reader can emotionally identify, a character who may warp into the landscape of disaster, but who matures rather than devolves.

Why then was the novel not a commercial success in the United States when the likes of Spielberg was so quick to sniff out the story's appeal to a mass audience? Because the buyers for the bookstore chains could not credit such appeal in a Ballard novel? Because the hero is British? Because the book was not properly promoted in trade?

Will the film make the paperback tie-in reissue a best-seller? Will it introduce Ballard's other work to a mass American audience?

At this writing these are tales yet to be told, but if I were guessing, I'd say that the movie tie-in will do well, the backlist will be reissued but do comparatively poorly, Ballard will be able to secure decent American publication for his future work, but he will probably not emerge as a major literary figure in America.

On the other hand, who really knows? *The Day of Creation*, Ballard's next and latest novel, clearly demonstrates that the creative breakthrough of *Empire of the Sun* was no fluke generated by the autobiographical nature of the material; that, perhaps via the cathartic effect of writing it, Ballard has achieved and consolidated a new level of literary clarity and emotional balance at this mature stage in his career.

The Day of Creation is a Ballardian disaster novel in reverse. Dr. Mallory, a typical alienated and ill Ballardian protagonist who narrates the novel in first person, accidentally triggers the birth of a new river, the Mallory, in drought-stricken Central Africa. The river grows, generating a new lush Eden in the desert along its banks, and Mallory, pursued by the local police captain, the local guerilla forces, a degenerating documentary film maker, his Indian assistant, and an obsessed widow, flees by boat up toward its mysterious source, accompanied by Noon, a young African girl who may or may not be a figment of his fevered imagination.

For the first time, Ballard gives us a natural landscape in the process of glorious exfoliation rather than degeneration. And he describes it with a precision previously applied only to the technosphere, and with a passionate naturalist's eye that he has never really displayed before.

And here the protagonist does not devolve into a hostile altered landscape. Instead, a hostile landscape is gloriously transformed into a new Eden which emerges out of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

his inner space in a magical act of creation. Mallory openly identifies the river with his own body and blood, and, in keeping with his ambivalent attitude towards himself, cherishes the river even as he seeks to destroy it at its source, pursued by the demons of the western technosphere, petty third world empire-building, and his own self-alienation.

Mallory has an awareness of his own ambivalence towards himself and his river throughout, a Ballardian character possessed for the first time with a degree of Ballardian insight, rendered thereby emotionally closer to the reader than such obsessives have been before, sympathetic in his self-defeating behavior, if not exactly lovable.

That the Eden of the Mallory is eventually polluted and destroyed by these forces and Mallory's own obsessions is thus a true tragedy, in the context of which Ballard succeeds in closing the novel on a note of pathos rather than despair.

In its condensed imagistic prose, *The Day of Creation* does skirt perilously close to self-parody of middle-period Ballard. But it never quite goes over the top. For it is balanced by the emotional intimacy and straightforward narrative drive that emerged in *Empire of the Sun* in a manner that indicates that Ballard, like Mallory, has penetrated to the headwaters of his own flow of creation, but, unlike Mallory, has emerged from the experience a wiser and more truly mature creator.

Whether the film of *Empire of the Sun* will win *The Day of Creation* the American audience it deserves—or, more properly, bring it to the attention of those who deserve to have the opportunity of reading it—is in the hands of the gods of the marketplace.

One thing is certain—the next chapter in the career of J.G. Ballard will tell us much about the realities of American publishing, the publicity value of a major film to a writer's total oeuvre, the differences between American and British reading publics, and perhaps, who knows, the state of American letters itself. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

With exams ending, the last half of May is a busy time. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, & a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 4271 Duke St. #D-10, Alexandria VA 22304. The hot line is (703) 823-3117. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. Early evening's often a good time to phone cons (most numbers are homes). Be polite on the phone. When writing cons, enclose an SASE. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, with a musical keyboard.

APRIL, 1988

22-24—**MarCon.** For info, write: **Box 211101, Columbus OH 43221.** Or call: **(614) 475-0158** (10 A.M. to 10 P.M., not collect). Con will be held in: Columbus OH (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Plaza Hotel. Guests will include: artist Michael Whelan. One of the classic, mellow midwestern cons.

22-24—**Name That Con. (314) 773-6626 or 946-9147.** Park Terrace Hilton, St. Louis MO airport.

22-24—**SwampCon. (504) 342-1337, 342-5353, 355-8246 or 346-1011.** Rodeway Inn, Baton Rouge, LA.

29-1 May—**Corflu.** University Plaza Motel, Seattle WA. Fanzine fans' con. The original fandom.

29-1 May—**AmigoCon. (915) 542-0443.** Holiday Inn Sunland Park, El Paso TX. Effinger, B. Foster.

29-1 May—**Contraption.** Southfield Hilton, Detroit MI. Octavia Butler, fans Hlavaty, J. Ecklar.

MAY, 1988

6-8—**RocKon, Box 45122, Little Rock AR 72214.** Hot Springs AR. Algis Budrys, fan Guy Lillian III.

13-15—**MisCon, Box 9363, Missoula MT 29807. (406) 549-1435.** Greg Bear, artist David Cherry.

13-15—**ValleyCon, Box 1576, Cornwall ON K6H 5V6.** Poul Anderson, Gary Gygax. Psychic programming.

20-22—**Kubla Khan, 647 Devon Dr., Nashville TN 37220. (615) 832-8402, 360-8955.** The 16th annual.

20-22—**KeyCon, Box 3178, Winnipeg MB R3C 4E6.** The Canadian National Con for 1988. Gene Wolfe.

21-22—**Oasis, Box 175, Maitland FL 32751.** Orlando FL. Andre Norton, artist Mary Hansen-Roberts.

27-29—**VCon, Box 48478 Ben. Stn., Vancouver BC V7X 1A2. (604) 271-5951.** Clement.

27-30—**Space Development Con, Box 300572, Denver CO 80218.** National Space Society's annual meet.

27-30—**BayCon, Box 70393, Sunnyvale CA 94086. (408) 446-5141.** Red Lion Inn, San Jose CA.

27-30—**DisClave, 4022 S. 16th, Arlington VA 22204.** New Carrollton MD. B. Hambly. In the DisCave.

SEPTEMBER, 1988

1-5—**NoLaCon II, 921 Canal #831, New Orleans LA 70112. (504) 525-6008.** WorldCon. $70 in advance.

AUGUST, 1989

31-Sep. 4—**Noreascon 3, Box 46, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139.** WorldCon, Andre Norton. $60.

AUGUST, 1990

23-27—**ConFiction, Box 95370 - 2509 CJ, The Hague, Holland.** WorldCon. Haldeman. $60 to 12/1/88.

28-Sep. 1—**ConDiego, Box 203534, San Diego CA 92120. (619) 265-0903.** NASFiC. $35 until ???.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

TAKE ANY 5 BOOKS FOR $1

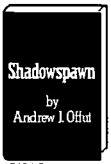
WITH MEMBERSHIP.

SEE OTHER SIDE FOR ADDITIONAL SELECTIONS.

3905 Pub. ed. $16.95
Club ed. $6.98

* 3236 Pub. ed. $19.95
Club ed. $9.98

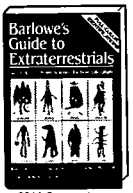
3863 Spec. ed. ▲
Club ed. $4.98



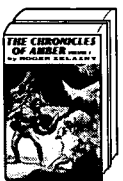
5181 Spec. ed. ▲
Club ed. $5.98

4010 Pub. ed. $19.95
Club ed. $4.98
Nonfiction

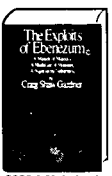
4028 Spec. ed. ▲
Club ed. $4.98



3814 Spec. ed. ▲
Pub. ed. $10.98



0075 The First 5 Novels. 2 vols. Comb. pub. ed. $32.30
Club ed. $8.98

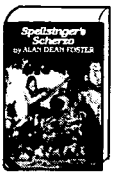


3830 A Malady of Magicks; A Multitude of Monsters; A Night in the Netherhells. Spec. ed. ▲
Club ed. $6.98

0752 Elric of Melnibone; The Sailor on the Seas of Fate; The Weird of the White Wolf. Spec. ed. ▲
Club ed. $6.98

1172 The Vanishing Tower; The Bane of the Black Sword; Stormbringer. Spec. ed. ▲
Club ed. $7.98

5520 The Sleeping Dragon; The Sword and the Chain; The Silver Crown. Spec. ed. ▲
Club ed. $8.98



* 2345 The Moment of the Magician; The Paths of the Perambulator; The Time of the Transference. Spec. ed. ▲
Club ed. $7.98

4267 Spec. ed. ▲
Club ed. $9.98

▲ Exclusive hardcover edition

* Explicit scenes and/or language may be offensive to some.

How the Club Works: You'll receive your 5 books for only $1 (plus shipping and handling) after your application for membership is accepted. We reserve the right to reject any application. However, once accepted as a member, you may examine the books in your home and, if not completely satisfied, return them within 10 days at Club expense. Your membership will be canceled and you'll owe nothing.

About every 4 weeks (14 times a year), we'll send you the Club's bulletin, *Things to Come*, describing the 2 coming Selections and a variety of Alternate choices. In addition, up to 4 times a year you may receive offers of special Selections, always at low Club prices. If you want the 2 Selections, you need do nothing; they'll be shipped automatically.

If you don't want a Selection, prefer an Alternate or no book at all, just fill out the convenient form always provided and return it to us by the date specified.

We allow you at least 10 days for making your decision. If you do not receive the form in time to respond within 10 days and receive an unwanted Selection, you may return it at our expense.

As a member you need buy only 4 books at regular low Club prices during the coming year. You may resign anytime thereafter or continue to enjoy Club benefits for as long as you wish. One of the 2 Selections each month is only $4.98. Other Selections are higher, but always much less than hardcover publishers' editions —UP TO 65% OFF. The Club offers more than 400 books to choose from. Each volume printed on our special presses is produced on high-quality acid-free paper. A shipping and handling charge is added to all shipments. Send no money now, but do mail the coupon today!

SCIENCE FICTION BOOK CLUB®

Garden City, NY 11535

I want the best SF in or out of this world! Please accept my application for membership in the Science Fiction Book Club. Send me the 5 books I have numbered in the boxes below, and bill me just $1 (plus shipping and handling). I agree to the Club Plan as described in this ad. I will take 4 more books at regular low Club prices in the coming year and may resign anytime thereafter. SFBC offers serious works for mature readers.

1.	2.	3.	4.	5.

CZ735

Mr.
Ms. _____
(Please print)

Address _____ Apt. # _____

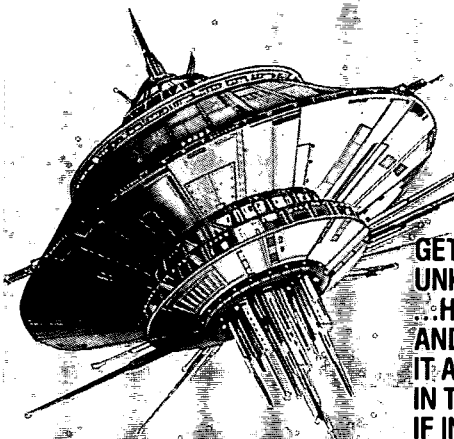
City _____

State _____ Zip _____

If under 18, parent must sign _____

The Science Fiction Book Club offers its own complete hardbound editions sometimes altered in size to fit special presses and save you even more. Members accepted in U.S.A. and Canada only. Canadian members will be serviced from Canada. Offer slightly different in Canada. 38-SF07

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



ATTENTION

GET READY TO JOURNEY TO EARTHS UNKNOWN...TAMPER WITH EVOLUTION ...HELP SOLVE INTERGALACTIC TURMOIL... AND MEET NEW FORMS OF ALIEN LIFE. IT ALL BEGINS WITH MEMBERSHIP IN THE SCIENCE FICTION BOOK CLUB. IF INTERESTED, JOIN TODAY!

4002 Pub. ed. $19.95
Club ed. $6.98

2964 Spec. ed. ▲
Club ed. $6.98

4358 Pub. ed. $19.95
Club ed. $6.98

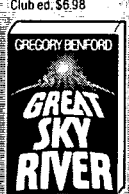
4861 Pub. ed. $16.95
Club ed. $5.98

4143 Spec. ed. ▲
Club ed. $4.98

3939 Pub. ed. $17.95
Club ed. $5.98

3806 Pub. ed. $16.95
Club ed. $6.98

3889 Spec. ed. ▲
Club ed. $4.98



3897 Pub. ed. $17.95
Club ed. $7.98

†**4887** Spec. ed. ▲
Club ed. $4.98

4226 Pub. ed. $15.95
Club ed. $4.98

★ **4879** Pub. ed. $17.95
Club ed. $5.98

1420 Includes the First, Second and Third Books.
Spec. ed. ▲
Club ed. $7.98

4218 Starlide Rising; The Uplift War.
Spec. ed. ▲
Club ed. $9.98

0992 Dragonsong; Dragonsinger; Dragondrums.
Comb. pub. ed. $38.85
Club ed. $7.98

3871 Includes The Silent Tower and The Silicon Mage.
Spec. ed. ▲
Club ed. $7.50

★ **3731** Night's Master; Death's Master; Delusion's Master.
Spec. ed. ▲
Club ed. $8.98

★ **3715** Delirium's Mistress; Night's Sorceries.
Spec. ed. ▲
Club ed. $7.98

TAKE ANY 5 BOOKS FOR $1

WITH MEMBERSHIP.

SEE OTHER SIDE FOR ADDITIONAL SELECTIONS.

SCIENCE FICTION BOOK CLUB®

▲ Exclusive hardcover edition.
★ Explicit scenes and/or language may be offensive to some.

†Copyright © 1987 Paramount Pictures Corporation All Rights Reserved.
STAR TREK Is A Registered Trademark Of Paramount Pictures Corporation

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED